

Bald Eagle killed by wind turbine in Bowling Green, Ohio

By

Steve Pollick

June 5, 2020

Ohio's first known death of a bald eagle by collision with the blades of a large wind turbine, which occurred near Bowling Green in January, raises serious questions about potentially legalized killings of eagles, according to the Black Swamp Bird Observatory, of Oak Harbor.

The death of the eagle occurred Jan. 17 at a four-turbine complex in Wood County in northwest Ohio, and remains under federal and state investigation. Eagles are strictly protected both by the federal Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act and federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act as well as state laws.

“This eagle death amounts to prohibited negligence under the Eagle Act,” asserted Mark Shieldcastle, BSBO research director and retired Ohio Department of Natural Resources biologist who managed the state's bald eagle recovery program. “After pollution in Lake Erie nearly wiped this bird out in the late 1970s, Ohio invested a tremendous amount of resources over decades to bring this magnificent bird back to Ohio,” Shieldcastle states.

Peer-reviewed scientific studies have established that hundreds of thousands birds, from large raptors like eagles to migratory neotropical songbirds, are slain annually by turbine blades. Bats also are extremely vulnerable to the turbine threat. The death tolls only will increase, BSBO contends, as construction of wind farms increases under lax scrutiny.

Both the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the ODNR remain silent about the January killing, pending the outcome an investigation. But the federal legal path in the case leads through the USFWS to the U.S. Department of Justice. The investigative legal path in Ohio not only involves wildlife laws protecting birds, but also, in the long-term, revolves around relatively weak rules by which large turbine complexes are permitted under the Ohio Power Siting Board.

The origin of the slain eagle is unknown and the news of its death follows a convoluted path. In early March, John Hageman, a member of the BSBO Conservation Committee, confirmed an eagle nest near the wind turbines. Hageman, a retired biologist who lives near the Wood County turbines, photographed the nest, with two mature eagles perched upon it, and also notified the ODNR and USFWS.

In the course of his discussions with authorities, Hageman learned that an eagle had been killed in January in collision with one of the wind turbines. The death was investigated by a state wildlife officer, who took possession of the carcass and a severed wing, photographed them, and then turned the remains over to the federal agency, as required by law. The officer filed an incident report.

But it was only with the publication on May 1 of an investigative story by Matt Markey in The Blade newspaper in Toledo that the eagle death by turbine came to light in the broader public.

The co-owner, and operator of the turbines, American Municipal Power, Inc. (AMP), apparently was not made aware of the incident until March. AMP operates four, 1.8-megawatt wind turbines at the site of the Wood County landfill. The city of Bowling Green owns about half the complex and obtains just 1.5 percent of its power from it. Because AMP isn't required to monitor the site for bird or bat deaths, and has no mitigation plan in place, it was unaware of the killing of a bald eagle and has no protocol for preventing a recurrence.

That's because the turbines were erected two at a time instead of all four at once, never coming under the jurisdiction of the OPSB, which has a 5-megawatt jurisdictional threshold. The final capacity of the four turbines is 7.2 MW, but because they were put up two at a time, the projects reached only 3.6 MW each; so they were able to avoid scrutiny of the OPSB and subsequent involvement by the ODNR.

Wind energy developers in Ohio are exploiting this technical loophole to erect turbines, many in highly sensitive bird areas. BSBO is calling for revision of Ohio law to tighten oversight permitting of large wind turbines. "We recommend that wind projects come before the OPSB, and comply with the environmental assessment and planning process, even to a threshold of just 100 kilowatts," states Don Bauman, BSBO Conservation Chair. "This would allow homeowners to install their own wind turbines, but would require commercial projects to come under jurisdiction of the OPSB."

"While there is no doubt that we need to encourage renewable energy, heedless development is not appropriate for our future or the survival of biodiversity" said Bauman. "There needs to be caution, care, and sound, scientific, ecological planning at the very beginning of all wind projects. This has been sadly lacking in the wind development of the past and it's time for a change."