

Federal approval near for sprawling Calif. wind project

Scott Streater, Environment & Energy Publishing, 2-15-13

The Obama administration is proposing to significantly reduce the size and energy output of a large-scale wind farm project proposal in Southern California to avoid impacts to golden eagles and endangered condors.

At issue is the Bureau of Land Management's final environmental impact statement (EIS) for the Alta East Wind Project, which includes a "preferred alternative" that the project be significantly scaled back from the original proposal to string together as many as 106 wind turbines across more than 2,500 acres of mostly public land in Kern County, according to an advance [notice](#) published in today's *Federal Register*.

The final EIS will be formally published in the *Federal Register* on Tuesday, though a 30-day public review and protest period has already begun and will end March 18, said Doran Sanchez, a BLM spokesman in Sacramento.

New York-based Terra-Gen Power, which owns project proponent Alta Windpower Development, has said it wants to begin construction this spring.

The preferred alternative would reduce the size of the project from 2,024 acres of public lands to 1,705 -- with a corresponding reduction in electrical output to 291 megawatts from the 318 MW originally proposed, according to BLM.

The smaller footprint avoids impacts to some desert tortoise and Joshua tree woodland habitat adjacent to the Pacific Crest Trail on the north end of the project site. In addition, it reduces impacts to golden eagles by eliminating nine proposed turbines on the north end that were about 2 miles from three active nests.

"We just decided the best thing to do to avoid all the potential conflicts with the eagles' nests, the Pacific Crest Trail and the neighbors would be to reduce the north end of the project," said Jeff Childers, the BLM project manager overseeing the federal review of the Alta East project.

But the reduction in power output means the wind farm will not be the largest on federal land in California, ranking behind the 315 MW Ocotillo Express Wind Energy Facility approved last year on more than 10,000 acres of BLM land in Southern California's Imperial County.

Still, Alta East is on track to become the seventh commercial-scale wind farm approved by BLM since 2009. Those seven approved projects, if built, would cover 250,000 acres of public land and have the capacity to produce 3,863 MW of electricity, which is enough to power about 1.3 million homes, according to federal statistics.

The Alta East Wind Project is one of six priority wind power projects that the Interior Department announced last week it intends to move through federal permitting this year and next. The six projects would have a total capacity to produce more than 1,100 MW of electricity, or enough to power more than 380,000 homes.

The Alta East project comes at a time of record growth for the wind industry. The American Wind Energy Association (AWEA) announced last month that 2012 was the industry's best year ever, with 13,124 MW of

Nationwide, there is now more than 60,000 MW of installed wind power capacity -- enough to power nearly 15 million homes, or every house in Colorado, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan, Nevada and Ohio, according to AWEA.

President Obama in his State of the Union speech this week set a goal of doubling the nation's renewable energy generation by 2020.

Childers said BLM is reviewing about 40 wind power plant applications in the state.

But it is often difficult to site large-scale renewables projects covering thousands of acres of public land. Alta East is the second major wind-power project to be dramatically scaled back, along with Ocotillo Express.

The Ocotillo Express Wind Energy Facility was originally proposed to string 155 wind turbines over nearly 13,000 acres with a capacity to produce 465 MW, but was scaled back in an effort to avoid culturally significant landmarks.

Despite the revisions, the Quechan Tribe of the Fort Yuma Indian Reservation filed a federal lawsuit last year against Interior to stop the project. San Francisco-based Pattern Energy Group LP, the project proponent, began construction last year, and the wind farm is about 80 percent complete, Childers said.

There do not appear to be any significant tribal issues associated with the Alta East project, Childers said.

And environmentalists say they're pleased with the decision to scale back the size of the project.

"I'm glad to see they have pulled back the project and taken out some turbines where we know adjacent eagle nests are located because that will help cut down on mortalities," said Ileene Anderson, a staff biologist for the Center for Biological Diversity in Los Angeles.

But Anderson said she's concerned about cumulative impacts of large-scale development on eagles and endangered condors in the Tehachapi Pass area, through which a lot of migratory birds pass each year.

The revised project "still doesn't put out of harm's way the greater eagle population who migrate through that area," she said.

Childers said Terra-Gen has produced a plan to address golden eagles in the area, as required under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. The Fish and Wildlife Service must approve the plan, which will be analyzed as part of an FWS biological opinion of the project.

Interior cannot issue a record of decision authorizing the project until the biological opinion is issued, Childers said.

[Click here](#) to read the final EIS.