

BLM advancing large Calif. project with measures to avoid condors, eagles

Scott Streater, *Environment & Energy Publishing*, 4-18-14

The Obama administration has completed the draft environmental analysis of a commercial-scale wind farm project in the foothills of the Tehachapi mountain range, an area that has some of the nation's best wind resources near habitat for California condors and golden eagles.

The Bureau of Land Management today released a draft environmental impact statement (EIS) for the Tylerhorse Wind Project in Kern County, Calif., proposed to be built on about 1,200 acres of BLM land inside the Tehachapi Wind Resource Area where wind farms have been in operation for 30 years.

BLM and U.S. EPA both published notices in today's *Federal Register* announcing the availability of the draft EIS, which kicks off a 90-day public comment period running through July 17.

The Tylerhorse Wind Project, proposed by a subsidiary of Iberdrola Renewables LLC, would have the capacity to produce 60 megawatts of electricity, or enough to power about 20,000 homes and businesses.

The draft EIS also includes a draft plan to amend the California Desert Conservation Area to allow for the wind farm. But the Tehachapi area where the wind project is proposed comprises a mixture of public and private lands already dotted with wind farms, including the Catalina Renewable Energy Project and the Pacific Wind Project.

The Tylerhorse project would share an existing operations and maintenance building with Iberdrola's adjacent 189 MW Manzanita Wind Energy Project. And a portion of the project could also connect to the Whirlwind substation through the adjacent Pacific Wind Project, according to BLM.

"We are excited to reach this milestone with the BLM, though plenty of work remains," Paul Copleman, a spokesman for Iberdrola Renewables, said in an emailed statement to *Greenwire*. "We think it's a great site for a wind project, in part because it's an area that already has wind projects operating, but also because it would take advantage of existing infrastructure at our operating Manzanita wind farm to minimize its potential impact."

BLM is aiming to issue a final EIS by the end of the year and a record of decision granting final approval by next year, said Mike Sintetos, a BLM spokesman in Sacramento.

It would take about four months to construct the 40-turbine layout, according to BLM. But Copleman said it is "premature to speculate on a timeline" for when the wind farm would be built and placed into operation.

If built, the Tylerhorse project would be one of the few commercial-scale wind farms on federal land in California.

BLM, which manages about 20 million acres of public land with wind power potential, has approved 11 large-scale wind projects in the West since 2009; three are located in the Golden State.

The Tylerhorse project would be the second large-scale wind power project on BLM land in Kern County, behind the 153 MW Alta East Wind Project approved last year on about 2,000 acres of BLM land.

The Tylerhorse proposal would rank a distant fourth on BLM land in the state in terms of electricity generating capacity, behind the Alta East project, the 315 MW Ocotillo Express Wind Energy Facility approved in 2012 on more than 10,000 acres of BLM land in Southern California's Imperial County, and Iberdrola's own 186 MW Tule Wind Power Project in San Diego County.

But Tylerhorse would be located in an area that is known habitat for California condors and golden eagles.

BLM's record of decision for the Alta East project last year included a first-ever incidental take permit authorized by the Fish and Wildlife Service allowing the project proponent, New York-based Terra-Gen Power LLC, to kill or harm one endangered California condor during the 30-year life of the project. BLM has yet to detect any condors at the project site.

Terra-Gen Power installed advanced condor mitigation measures, including very high frequency (VHF) equipment that can pick up signals from radio telemetry devices placed on all California condors that allow the wind farm operators to detect condors as far as 16 miles away. The detection of condors within 2 miles would signal to operators to reduce wind turbine speeds to 15 miles per hour.

Iberdrola Renewables is proposing many of the same enhanced mitigation measures for the Tylerhorse Wind Project.

Sintetos, the BLM spokesman, said the agency will consult with Fish and Wildlife on the project but that no decision has been made yet whether to request an incidental take permit or even whether such a permit is necessary at the site.

"There's no answer to that yet," he said.

EPA's Region 9 office in San Francisco submitted scoping comments to BLM in October 2011 urging the agency to include in the draft EIS specific measures to reduce impacts to eagles and clarify how the proposed project will comply with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.

Jeff Aardahl, a biologist and the California representative for Defenders of Wildlife, said that after taking a cursory look at the multivolume draft EIS, BLM and Iberdrola Renewables appear to have done a considerable amount of work to devise mitigation strategies to reduce impacts to birds and bats.

"They appear to have followed kind of the lead set by the Alta East Wind Project developers," Aardahl said. "I think this document shows they've gone to some greater efforts and made enhanced measures for mitigation that don't always show up in other projects."

Aardahl said he does worry about the general location of the project on the desert slope of the Tehachapi Mountains, and he said he is concerned about the concentration of wind farms in the general area.

But he added that he would rather have wind development in the already developed area than in more remote, pristine areas.

"We're going to have wind power, there's no doubt about it," he said. "I think the argument can be made [that] if the resource is good and there's a lot of turbines out there already, let's maximize the area's potential and do the proper mitigation. I'd rather them fill in all the in-between spaces out there than say, 'Well, we've had enough, let's go to some other place in the desert without any development.'"

