



Highlights of [GAO-05-906](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Wind power has recently experienced dramatic growth in the United States, with further growth expected. However, several wind power-generating facilities have killed migratory birds and bats, prompting concern from wildlife biologists and others about the species affected, and the cumulative effects on species populations.

GAO assessed (1) what available studies and experts have reported about the impacts of wind power facilities on wildlife in the United States and what can be done to mitigate or prevent such impacts, (2) the roles and responsibilities of government agencies in regulating wind power facilities, and (3) the roles and responsibilities of government agencies in protecting wildlife. GAO reviewed a sample of six states with wind power development for this report.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FWS provide state and local regulatory agencies with information on the potential wildlife impacts from wind power and the resources available to help make decisions about where wind power development should be approved.

The Department of the Interior agreed with GAO's recommendation.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/gettrpt?GAO-05-906.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

WIND POWER

Impacts on Wildlife and Government Responsibilities for Regulating Development and Protecting Wildlife

What GAO Found

The impact of wind power facilities on wildlife varies by region and by species. Specifically, studies show that wind power facilities in northern California and in Pennsylvania and West Virginia have killed large numbers of raptors and bats, respectively. Studies in other parts of the country show comparatively lower levels of mortality, although most facilities have killed at least some birds. However, many wind power facilities in the United States have not been studied, and, therefore, scientists cannot draw definitive conclusions about the threat that wind power poses to wildlife in general. Further, much is still unknown about migratory bird flyways and overall species population levels, making it difficult to determine the cumulative impact that the wind power industry has on wildlife species. Notably, only a few studies exist concerning ways in which to reduce wildlife fatalities at wind power facilities.

Regulating wind power facilities is largely the responsibility of state and local governments. In the six states GAO reviewed, wind power facilities are subject to local- or state-level processes, such as zoning ordinances to permit the construction and operation of wind power facilities. As part of this process, some agencies require environmental assessments before construction. However, regulatory agency officials do not always have experience or expertise to address environmental and wildlife impacts from wind power. The federal government plays a minimal role in approving wind power facilities, only regulating facilities that are on federal lands or have some form of federal involvement, such as receiving federal funds. In these cases, the wind power project must comply with federal laws, such as the National Environmental Policy Act, as well as any relevant state and local laws.

Federal and state laws afford generalized protections to wildlife from wind power as with any other activity. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is the primary agency tasked with implementing wildlife protections in the United States. Three federal laws—the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, and the Endangered Species Act—generally forbid harm to various species of wildlife. Although significant wildlife mortality events have occurred at wind power facilities, the federal government has not prosecuted any cases against wind power companies under these wildlife laws, preferring instead to encourage companies to take mitigation steps to avoid future harm. All of the six states GAO reviewed had statutes that can be used to protect some wildlife from wind power impacts; however, similar to FWS, no states have taken any prosecutorial actions against wind power facilities where wildlife mortalities have occurred.