

### **Northwest Missouri Wind Farm Raises Concerns For Wildlife**

#### **News**

Posted by : Randy

Posted on : 2014/5/5 5:36:35

MOUND CITY, Mo. ([kansascity.com](http://kansascity.com)) — Every year they come — millions of migratory birds to the wetlands and fields of Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge near this small town in Holt County.



Among the regulars are pelicans, wood ducks, trumpeter swans, blue-winged teals, sandhill cranes, blue herons, snow geese and smaller shorebirds such as the killdeer. After a layover, they ride the updraft from wind hitting the nearby Loess Hills, formed thousands of years ago from wind-blown soil.

Now a company wants to capture that same wind by building Missouri's largest wind farm nearby. Element Power of Portland, Ore., says it will break ground soon for its \$400 million Mill Creek Wind Energy Project: 84 to 118 wind turbines, each nearly 350 feet tall, on 25,000 acres the company has leased just east of Squaw Creek.

Several state conservation areas, such as Nodaway Valley and Honey Creek, sit around the site.

—If I could look all over northern Missouri for the worst possible place to put this thing, this would be it,— said John Rushin, who is a former head of the biology department at Missouri Western State University in St. Joseph and who has worked and researched at Squaw Creek for 30 years.

Ornithologists, the Audubon Society, the American Bird Conservancy and birders in general predict a slaughter as birds and bats fly into the whipping turbines. They particularly fear for protected and endangered species, such as the bald eagle and the Indiana bat, that frequent Squaw Creek. They worry, too, that the project could alter age-old migratory patterns.

The conflict shows how renewable energy — generally considered by environmentalists to be the good guys compared to oil and coal — can sometimes be at odds with nature lovers and conservationists.

Element Power chief executive officer Ty Daul said the company is excited to deliver —a Missouri-based source of clean energy.—

The company will sell power from the 200-megawatt facility to Kansas City Power & Light.

Opponents insist they fully support wind energy, but they question the wisdom of putting giant turbines near a migratory bird refuge.

—This appears to be very poorly sited and we would urge they come up with an alternative plan,— said Michael Hutchins, national coordinator for the American Bird Conservancy's Bird Smart Wind Energy Campaign.

Jack Hilsabeck of the Audubon Society of Missouri said: —I'm all for alternative energy, but this

is nonsense, a ridiculous place for this thing.

But Element Power says studies show any environmental impact would be minimal. Company officials also say they have worked closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the federal agency that manages Squaw Creek, to develop the project.

Georgia Parham, a service spokesperson, said U.S. Fish and Wildlife has made clear to Element Power the prevalence of migratory birds in the area and the company's risk of violating the Endangered Species Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act if certain birds or bats are killed.

The company would have to apply for incidental take permits if threatened or endangered species could be killed.

Element Power acknowledges that some birds would be killed but says most species at Squaw Creek fly too high to hit the turbines.

"That doesn't make sense," said David Easterla, an emeritus professor who retired last year from Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville, where he taught nearly 50 years. "The birds can't fly forever.

"They land in the fields and wetlands at Squaw Creek. That's why they call it a refuge."

As wind turbines increase their presence on the American landscape, some states have come up with siting boards to regulate where they may be placed.

Not Missouri. A company's plan does not need approval by the state's Public Service Commission, Department of Natural Resources or Department of Conservation.

"We shared our concerns with them (Element Power) about bald eagles and bats in the area," said Janet Sternburg, a policy coordinator for the Conservation Department. "We're going to meet with them again in a couple of weeks. But we can't tell them where to build a wind farm."

Nor can the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It has only the threat of prosecution if federal laws are violated.

Scott Zeimetz, project manager for Element Power, said the Mill Creek project would comply with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Endangered Species Act, and Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.

"Element Power is working with natural resource scientists that specialize in wind energy and wildlife interactions as part of a robust research effort," he said.

Rushin, the retired Missouri Western professor, can't see how Mill Creek can operate without killing a lot of birds.

"There are certainly better places to put this than a prime area for waterfowl, and anything that disrupts migration patterns is bad, in my opinion," he said. "But I know some people will make money on this. Still, I have to think that if you surveyed the entire population, most people would probably be against it."

Mark Sitherwood, presiding commissioner of Holt County, could not be reached for comment, but on the Element Power website he says he's all for Mill Creek:

"We have had a series of flooding events and disaster events and our population is declining and has for some time now. We are very excited about the four hundred million dollar project coming to

Holt County and it's going to be very good for us.

Left hand on the steering wheel of the white Ford Excursion, right hand on the binoculars.

Darrin Welchert drives a lot this way. He's the interim manager at Squaw Creek and the refuge biologist. One day last week he slowly cruised the 10-mile loop around thousands of acres of wetlands.

In March, a million snow geese showed up.

Welchert looked past the hundreds of pelicans to the far side of the water.

"That's a blue heron over there," he said.

Closer to the shore?

"Double-crested cormorant. Some pied-billed grebes in there, too. Northern shovelers over there."

On the ground, through the trees?

"Sandhill crane," he said.

He loves this place, established in 1935 as a feeding and breeding ground for migratory birds. The refuge, about 100 miles north of Kansas City, has more than 7,400 acres of wetlands, fields and grassland. It draws about 250,000 visitors a year, including many school groups.

But Welchert only smiles when asked his opinion of the planned wind farm. He and other staffers were told not to comment on the issue.

The gag order does not apply to Ron Bell, who retired from U.S. Fish and Wildlife last month after having managed Squaw Creek for 27 years. He said he learned about the project in January and thinks it's a terrible idea. He worries the tall turbines could cause birds to change their migratory pattern.

Element Power officials say that won't happen and that tax revenues will benefit Holt County as a whole as well as the school and fire districts. The project also will generate enough clean electricity to power about 60,000 homes.

The company hasn't put a number to the turbines or announced exactly where they will be placed.

Doesn't really matter, said Easterla, who co-wrote the book "Birds of Missouri." "If they are in the area of Squaw Creek, the effect on the birds will be the same, he said:

"The turbines are gonna whack 'em."