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Biologist: Planning can help birds, wind farms co-exist

As Maine seeks suitable offshore sites for turbines, Wing Goodale tracks bird activity along the coast.

By JOHN RICHARDSON, Staff Writer

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Researcher Wing Goodale is about to release a report and a preliminary map of bird populations. It will be part of a database that planners will use to pick Maine's offshore wind-power test sites.

As planners and developers zero in on locations for offshore wind turbines along the Maine coast, researchers such as Wing Goodale are trying to follow the birds.

Goodale, a biologist with the BioDiversity Research Institute in Gorham, is about to release a report and a preliminary map of bird populations along the Maine coast. It's one of several efforts to prevent, or at least reduce, conflicts between offshore turbines and the animals that live in or pass through coastal Maine.

"We actually have a lot of data on where the sensitive (bird) populations are," said Goodale. "The piece of data that's not so good is how these birds are moving around. That's really the tough piece."

The Gulf of Maine has such strong and steady winds that it's been called the Saudi Arabia of wind energy. A state task force is now searching for as many as five offshore sites for Maine's first experimental turbines.

The region also is rich with migrating and nesting birds, from tiny warblers and endangered terns to eider ducks and bald eagles. Even certain kinds of migrating bats have been found resting on Maine's offshore islands.

Although the developers of land-based wind farms generally know where the birds and bats are, the animals' movements offshore are more of a mystery.

"It's some pretty uncharted territory," said Beth Nagusky, co-chair of Maine's Ocean Energy Task Force.

Gov. John Baldacci created the task force in part to explore the potential for offshore wind projects and to find suitable sites.

The potential for wildlife conflicts, and how to avoid them, is a big issue facing offshore wind development around the world, and it will be one of the topics of a three-day international conference that began Tuesday at the Samoset Resort in Rockport.

The 2009 EnergyOcean Conference is being attended by more than 350 scientists, developers and policymakers from around the world, including many from Maine.

Goodale has already shown his report and map to some Maine policymakers and plans to release it officially this week. The report is based on previous research by government and private biologists here, and it also draws on the experiences of existing offshore wind farms in Europe.

Goodale's map and other research efforts are being compiled by the University of Maine into a broad coastal database that state planners will use to choose Maine's five initial test sites.

Goodale said he's confident that there is room in the Gulf of Maine for both birds and wind turbines.

"Ultimately there are going to be some impacts, and we have to accept that," he said. But "you can really have all the benefits, and you can reduce the impacts. It's not an all-or-nothing situation."

Goodale, like other researchers, is urging policymakers to require studies of bird and bat habitats and movements before development, as well as post-construction monitoring. The studies could help wind farm developers adjust their designs and operations to avoid blocking a migration path or cutting off a bird colony from its foraging area, he said.

In poor weather conditions, for example, migrating birds have been attracted to the lights on offshore oil platforms and are more vulnerable to collisions, he said.

"They've evolved without any lights in the sky except for the moon and stars, and they use the moon and stars to help navigate," he said.

Goodale also wants the state to create an advisory board of bird and bat experts who could advise the task force and other policymakers. "There's such great knowledge in this state that isn't necessarily published," he said.

Sean Mahoney, a lawyer with the Conservation Law Foundation, is a member of the state's Ocean Energy Task Force and chair of its human and environmental impacts subcommittee.

Goodale's map, and the continuing advice of Maine's bird and bat experts, will be a key part of the process and "help the task force in making sure we stay away from areas where we know we shouldn't go," Mahoney said.

"These concerns are part of the mix," he said. "You can't go pell-mell just because it's renewable energy. It's got to be done appropriately and responsibly."

Staff Writer John Richardson can be contacted at 791-6324 or at: jrichardson@pressherald.com

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