



January 23, 2017 | ☀ 76° | 🚗 Check Traffic

Editorial | Our View

# Expand scrutiny of wind turbines

Posted January 23, 2017

January 23, 2017

As wind power emerges as a viable component in Hawaii's push to become energy-independent within three decades, it's time to step up monitoring of the impacts turbines have on the state's landscape and struggling native species.

While we're eager to lose our title as the most oil-dependent state in the nation, along with the priciest electricity rates nationwide — largely due to tapping imported oil for most of our power — we're also an endangered species hot spot. Of 1,276 endangered species of animals and plants listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 500 are from Hawaii. The state's list includes 77 animals and 423 plants.

Our challenging task of balancing the goal of producing more electricity using renewable resources with ongoing efforts to protect endangered species is underscored by a recent red-flag report that found Hawaii's five major wind farms are killing endangered Hawaiian hoary bats at a faster pace than expected as allowed through state "incidental take" licenses.

Over a period of 6.4 years, wind turbine operations have killed 146 of these bats out of the 187 allowed over the span of 20 years under incidental take licenses. The bats are killed by colliding with turbine towers and blades. They also fall victim to barotrauma, barometric pressure changes from moving blades that damage lungs and other organs. Besides the bat species, which is Hawaii's official state land mammal, during the same period the farms killed at least 50 nene — the endangered Hawaiian goose and state bird — and 26 petrels, an endangered seabird.

State lawmakers should support a proposal being drafted by Sen. Gil Riviere (D, Heeia-Laie-Waialua), which is based on state Department of Land and Natural Resources Division of Forestry and Wildlife recommendations to expand the division's staff dedicated to monitoring and tracking statewide habitat conservation plans tagged to take licenses. Putting the matter on hold could further imperil endangered species in the islands.

Also, with windmills now anchored to the landscape for at least the next several decades, the state should spell out how to handle retirement of the structures. Community response to windmills is a mix — support for green-minded energy and lower electric bills, with complaints about operational noise, flashing red lights at night and blocked views — but no one should have to worry about the blight of rusting decommissioned wind farms. In the case of Kamaoa Windfarm in Hawaii island's remote South Point area, the last of its turbines was toppled in 2012, five years after the site was shuttered.

Two operating wind farms — Kawailoa Wind and Kahuku Wind – are within Riviere's district. With plans in the works for a third farm, Na Pua Makani, to bring more windmills to Kahuku, it's important for the state to get a better handle on how to protect endangered species in take licenses.

The licenses are contingent, in part, on an applicant's pledge to compensate for kills by paying for conservation research and implementing mitigation measures. In the case of the bat, that could include slowing blade speeds during the animal's active periods — sunset to sunrise — and monitoring for habitat-threatening animals and vegetation. In addition to collisions with structures and fences, deforestation threatens the endemic species of hairy-tailed bat, which provides pest control by gobbling up mosquitoes, beetles, termites and other insects.

A combination of public funds and wind farm contributions could advance wildlife research as Hawaiian Electric Co. preps to forge ahead in expanding the turbine lineup in its Maui, Oahu and Hawaii island territories in the next five years. Earlier this month, HECO put out a call seeking "shovel-ready" developers for Oahu projects before federal tax credits for wind power expire in 2019. The clock is ticking on that opportunity, and for Hawaii's endangered species that are affected.

 **Get the latest news by email** [Sign Up](#)