Eagle's Cause of Death Confirmed at Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge in Maryland

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has confirmed that a dead bald eagle found below a small 10-kilowatt wind turbine on Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge in Rock Hall, Md., was killed by blunt force trauma.

Refuge staff found the adult male eagle and sent it to the Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study in Athens, Ga., to establish the specific cause of death. The Service received the necropsy report from the Georgia facility the afternoon of June 19, 2012.

As smart renewable energy is important to the Service, the refuge installed a single, 60-foot-tall wind turbine in 2002 to provide an alternative source of energy for its facilities. In addition, the refuge has installed a 5-kilowatt solar array that provides power to an administrative building. A contractor hired by the Service conducted a 3.5-year study after the turbine's installation, which indicated a mortality rate averaging less than three native birds a year and no effects to eagles.

In Maryland, the bald eagle population has increased from 44 nesting pairs in 1977 to now more than 500 pairs. A very dense population of bald eagles lives in the refuge area, with about eight nesting territories this year. An American success story, the eagle's remarkable recovery led to its removal from the federal list of threatened and endangered species in 2007.

However, bald eagles remain protected under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. The Service continues to encourage wind project developers to coordinate early to help minimize risks to birds and is finalizing guidance for eagle conservation plans to address potential impacts. The Service has treated the incident at Eastern Neck National Wildlife Refuge as it would any similar incident at a non-federal wind energy facility.

Due to hurricane damage and the lack of power being generated by the turbine, the refuge has removed the turbine and blades, leaving only the tower. The refuge is re-evaluating the long term viability of this wind energy project to consider additional factors, such as newer technology, vertical wind turbines, tower height and location.

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