

U.S. wind farms won't get in trouble for killing bald and golden eagles

SEATTLE — The government said Friday that some wind power companies will be allowed to kill, by accident, bald and golden eagles. They'll be able to do it for up to 30 years. And they won't get in trouble.

The White House wants to produce power from wind farms. It wants the U.S. to use less oil and coal for power. Those types hurt nature. But, it also wants to preserve wildlife like the bald eagle. The problem is that eagles die by accident when they fly into the wind farms. The farms have turbines which spin around. The birds get caught in them. Groups trying to help eagles slammed the new rules. They said it was a bad move for wildlife.

Wind Farms Wanted Longer Permits

David Yarnold is president of the National Audubon Society, a group that helps save birds. He said "it's outrageous" that the government is allowing the killing of America's symbol. Peter Kelley works for the American Wind Energy Association. He disagrees. He said it's not easy for wind farms to get permits under the new rules. They will have to list all of the different ways they'll preserve the eagles. The government began giving permits to wind farms in 2009. Those permits allowed for the killing of bald and golden eagles. Both types of eagles are protected by the government. The permits lasted five years at most. Wind businesses said that was not enough. They said the permits needed to be longer. Otherwise it wouldn't be worth spending money to build wind power farms. The new rules extend the permits. But, to no more than 30 years. And, they will be given only to companies that make sure eagles are preserved. Kelley said the new rules would "increase the protection of eagles and will help develop more wind farms." He said wind farms are important. They can help stop climate change.

New Rules Voluntary

Climate change is a shift in weather patterns. It's thought to be caused in part by humans burning fuels. That leads to global warming. He says that climate change is "the No. 1 threat to all eagles and all wildlife." Not wind farms. Under the new rules, permits will be looked at every five years. And the number of eagle deaths will be counted. Population levels of the birds will be checked. Government officials could make companies change their ways to kill fewer eagles. And they could take away their permits. But the American Bird Conservancy says that the new rules are voluntary. Wind farms don't have to pay attention to them. And it said the government is asking the companies to say if they've killed the eagles. No one is checking up on them.

Wind Power Vs. Birds And Bats

Kelley, from the American Wind Energy Association, said that wind farms hadn't had a big effect on bald eagles. He said that only a tiny amount of the golden eagles killed by humans died because of wind farms. The population of golden eagles in the West isn't going down, he said. It might even be going up. Michael Hutchins is an expert on wind power at the bird conservancy. He pointed to a new study. It found that 573,000 birds and 888,000 bats are killed every year by wind farms. And that could get worse, Hutchins said. The White House wants 12 times more energy to come from wind and the sun by 2030. He asked, "If it's not done right, what kind of an impact is that going to have on birds and bats?" Fifty years ago, chemicals were the greatest danger to eagles. They were used on crops to kill bugs. And, now, it's wind power. But, he supports wind power. "But it ought to be done right," Hutchins said. It's not helping nature "if it's killing hundreds of thousands of birds and bats annually and if it's killing large numbers of protected eagles."

PRO/CON: Is now the time for climate change laws in the U.S.? (01/14)

PRO: Congress could at least try

GREEN BAY, Wis. — In a report released this fall, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) said that the warming of the Earth's climate system can't be disputed. The IPCC is an organization of scientists set up by the United Nations. Its conclusion is based on several independent sources of information. The study also found that it was "extremely likely" that human influence has been the major cause of climate change. Our burning of oil, coal, and gas is particularly to blame. When we burn coal, oil or gas, it creates greenhouse gases, which heat up the earth and change our climate.

Need National Commitment

At the same time, international meetings have had little luck in getting countries to agree to produce less greenhouse gas. The Climate Change Conference just concluded in Poland but didn't result in any great agreement. Yet, these gases are serious risks for the world's businesses, its environment and public health. A major reason for the slow pace of global action is the United States, where we produce more greenhouse gases than any other country on a per-person basis. And we simply haven't stepped up to a leadership position. Nor, for that matter, has China, which has been developing quickly and building new cities and factories. That has pushed it to the No. 1 spot in producing greenhouse gas in total. It produces less per person than the U.S., but it has more than four times as many people as the U.S. does. What might the United States do to convincingly show that it is finally prepared to play a leading role in slowing the rate of global climate change? Passing a full-fledged national climate change law would be a good start.

The United States has hardly been standing still on the issue. More than half of the states and more than a thousand U.S. cities have passed a range of policies. These should substantially reduce the release of greenhouse gas emissions. They include new actions on renewable fuels, some of which are made from vegetables, instead of oil. There have also been laws passed to make sure energy isn't wasted, and to promote public transportation. Much has happened at the federal level too. The Obama administration has spent tens of billions of dollars on cutting-edge research to develop renewable energy technologies, such as wind or solar power.

Sending A Strong Signal

The administration also reached important agreements with the auto industry. Fuel standards are set to be raised for cars to 54.5 miles per gallon by 2025. The new standards mean big savings in the use of oil. Equally important, the White House and the Environmental Protection Agency are developing regulations for coal-fired power plants. These promise to begin shifting the nation away from the use of coal and toward other types of energy that release far fewer greenhouse gases. Yet the new regulations and policy plans are not enough to tackle climate change. They also come with no national political commitment. If there was, it might push reluctant nations around the world to do their own part. And some actions are certain to be challenged in court by the oil industry. National climate change policy would send a strong signal to the world. It would show that the United States takes climate change seriously, and that it is prepared to step out in front on the issue. How likely is it that a divided Congress can pass climate change legislation? It is not likely at present. And it won't happen as long as Republicans continue to deny the existence of climate change and defend the oil industry at all costs. Nonetheless, it is essential that Congress at least try. It needs to design and approve a national climate change policy, and it should do so soon. It needs to hold hearings, hear experts, review the evidence, and debate the issue at length to build support. Congress should explore all the tools it has. It must find ways to appeal to Republicans. If it needs to find ways that make businesses happy, then it should. Clearly, this will be an uphill battle, but it is necessary to try.