

Audubon: Turbines won't harm birds

■ Support for the wind farm is conditional on further studies.

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Claiming three years of fieldwork yielded no evidence of a major threat to birds, the Massachusetts Audubon Society announced Tuesday preliminary support for the proposed Nantucket Sound wind farm.

Two endangered Cape bird species – the piping plover and the roseate tern – typically avoid the 24-square-mile footprint on Horseshoe Shoal where a developer wants to build a 130-turbine renewable energy project, according to the group.

The group cautioned, however, that additional bird studies by the federal government and the developer are necessary and that research gaps still exist. If the wind farm is approved, Massachusetts Audubon will further challenge developer Cape Wind Associates to monitor bird deaths during construction and for three years after completion.

"We're not pro, we're not anti," said Jack Clarke, director of public policy and government relations for Massachusetts Audubon.

The group raised \$300,000 for the studies.

"So far it doesn't look that bad, but we need to collect more information," Clarke said.

Massachusetts Audubon, which also based its support for Cape Wind, in part, on concerns about global warming, has recently shared its findings with numerous agencies involved in the permitting process, Clarke said.

After a briefing on the report yesterday, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service official rebuffed Massachusetts Audubon's tentative endorsement, calling it premature and unhelpful to the wind farm project's overall review.

"We're not on the same page," said Vernon Lang, supervisor of Fish and Wildlife's New England field office and the agency's lead official on the Cape Wind proposal.

"There's a major chasm between what we see as data gaps and what they see as data gaps," he said.

Fish and Wildlife, which does not conduct specific site studies themselves, previously asked Cape Wind for three years of radar studies before a conclusion about bird impacts could be made. It's a request, Lang said, that has not yet been fulfilled by the developer.

Susan Nickerson, executive director of the Alliance to Protect Nantucket Sound – the local group trying to derail the project – echoed Lang's concerns.

"We're surprised that they've done this," Nickerson said of Massachusetts Audubon's public show of support. "They don't have the complete picture."

Cape Wind welcomed the news, saying Massachusetts Audubon's independent studies have bolstered what is known about avian life on Nantucket Sound. Cape Wind also pledged to satisfy the group's outstanding concerns.

"We certainly are examining the challenge they have put forward quite closely," said Mark Rodgers, Cape Wind spokesman.

Cape Wind must also submit an expanded report on environmental effects – including impacts on birds – to the Department of Interior, which is now the lead federal agency reviewing the project.

The Department of Interior has given \$100,000 to Massachusetts Audubon to continue bird studies on Nantucket Sound, Clarke said.

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