

Mass Audubon's wind farm challenge

By **TABER ALLISON**
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Mass Audubon challenges the developer of Cape Wind and its permitting agencies to accept comprehensive and rigorous monitoring and mitigation conditions that will reduce the risk to birds and other wildlife. If these conditions are adopted, and remaining significant data gaps are addressed, Mass Audubon will support Cape Wind, the largest clean, renewable-energy project in the Northeast.

Cape Wind consists of 130 wind turbines arrayed over 25 square miles of Horseshoe Shoal in Nantucket Sound. It also includes a platform for gathering the generated electricity and two underwater cables to transmit power to Cape Cod. The project is expected to provide the equivalent of 75 percent of the electricity consumed on the Cape.

The review of Cape Wind will set the standard for all future offshore wind projects in the nation, and it is important that we get it right.

Mass Audubon proposes this challenge after five years of project review, including three years of ornithological fieldwork; our assessment of the draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) and literature review; talks with ornithologists, scientists, and engineers; and a visit to Denmark's offshore wind farms during the 2005 spring bird migration. A revised DEIS is expected from the U.S. Interior Department this spring.

We review Cape Wind in the context of a planet experiencing rapid climate warming, oil spills, strip mining and air pollution.

Mass Audubon's technical review and assessment of the Cape Wind DEIS are focused primarily on the project's impacts on birds and their habitat to determine if the project poses no significant threat to living resources. This does not mean zero impact on those resources, because the production of energy always entails some level of environmental impact.

While Mass Audubon's primary expertise is bird life, we also believe other potential impacts are important and should be examined. We rely on the evaluation of our own scientists and the expertise of other organizations in assessing any potential threats from this project to the seafloor, fisheries, marine mammals and other sea life.

Mass Audubon has identified data gaps in the DEIS including:

- Nighttime distribution and behavior of hundred of thousands of long-tailed ducks in and around Horseshoe Shoal.

- Movement of endangered terns and threatened plovers during the late summer to early fall migration.

- Abundance and distribution of migrating songbirds.

Mass Audubon's support for Cape Wind is contingent upon

these gaps being addressed with a finding of no significant threat. Work on filling these gaps has begun or will begin shortly. We also propose adoption of an adaptive management plan that includes a rigorous monitoring program beginning at the construction phase and continuing for at least three years post-construction; mitigation measures in the event that the project results in significant adverse environmental impacts; compensation for the use of public lands and waters; and enforceable procedures for decommissioning any abandoned turbines.

An independent panel should be responsible for collecting and analyzing data collected during monitoring and preparing reports for peer review and dissemination to relevant agencies, Cape Wind and the public.

Finally, an independently administered mitigation fund should be established for conservation of bird habitat around Nantucket Sound. Monitoring and mitigation should be funded by Cape Wind with contributions from independent institutions and government agencies as appropriate.

We review Cape Wind in the context of a planet experiencing

rapid climate warming, oil spills, strip mining and air pollution. We know that the combustion of fossil fuels releases greenhouse gases including carbon dioxide and methane that accumulate in the lower atmosphere and rapidly heat the earth. Combustion of fossil fuels also results in the release of mercury that bio-accumulates in the environment causing health problems for humans, especially pregnant women and children.

Rising sea levels caused by warming will flood low-lying barrier beaches and islands that serve as critical habitat for coastal birds, including the endangered roseate tern and threatened piping plover.

The consequences of climate warming compel us to increase energy conservation as a first priority. To continue to supply our energy needs, wind should be tapped as the most successful and readily available of all renewable energy technologies.

The benefits and detriments of Cape Wind must be balanced against the significant threats to Nantucket Sound posed by fossil-fuel use and rapid climate warming. We must act boldly and quickly; uncertainty should not slow our response to this threat.

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