

# Trading Wildlife for Wind Energy

by Kevin Emmerich and Laura Cunningham  
[www.basinandrangewatch.org](http://www.basinandrangewatch.org)

At Carlsbad Caverns National Park, New Mexico, Park Rangers celebrate the ancient but nightly midsummer ritual of Brazilian free-tailed bats exiting the cave in an ecological insect feeding frenzy. Starting in late summer, a similar, less recognized event occurs in Nevada next to Great Basin National Park in a smaller cave providing a roosting colony for one million Brazilian free tailed bats. Once a fertilizer mine in the 1920's, the Rose Guano Cave has now been closed to mining guano by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and recognized as an important landmark to the survival of this population. It does indeed seem ironic that the BLM now considers this cave and its bats a resource that must be "adaptively managed".

In January, 2006, Spring Valley Wind LLC began testing a section of the remote Spring Valley, 12 miles from the boundary of Great Basin National Park, to construct 8,500 acres of 400-foot-tall wind turbines. In their best case scenario, 80 of these turbines would sell 149 megawatts of electricity to Las Vegas where green energy may someday provide power to the parking garage lights of the Mandalay Bay resort and casino.

Aside from being approximately one mile from the Rose Guano Cave, these huge wind turbines would include large "lay down" areas of bladed habitat for construction of turbines, 28 miles of new 68-foot-wide roads, fiber optic line trenches, plus microwave towers, substations, maintenance facilities and employee parking lots. Each turbine foundation would have 120 tons of cement. Cement, of course, needs water and the peak usage of water per construction would be 700,000 gallons or about 25 acre feet. This area is famous for outsiders seeking to waste water. The Southern Nevada Water Authority hopes to pipe a significant amount of the groundwater of this region to the casinos and housing developments in Las Vegas, making the only water available a temporary lease of water rights from the LDS Church. The project would be located next to the Swamp Cedar Area of Critical Environmental Concern, a rare habitat with spring wetlands and junipers growing on the basin floor. The BLM admits that placing large, heavy concrete foundations for turbines would draw the water down and away from the springs.

In spite of all these impacts, BLM has assured us that only one percent of the total land area would be disturbed. (They also found it amazing that

we thought the junipers were beautiful!) The one percent figure is ridiculous. The project area is rich in wildlife and is used by mule deer, pronghorn, and even elk have been observed close to the site. When one of us (Kevin) worked at Great Basin National Park, the park biologist thought golden eagles in Spring Valley were like "chickens" and it was true. On any day, a visitor could see at least two or three from the highway. Raptors commonly glide over the valley and surrounding mountains: peregrine falcons, ferruginous hawks, and even bald eagles, which are common winter residents. How tragic that the BLM has made protecting this symbol of the United States a second priority to subsidizing inefficient energy boondoggles (according to the California Energy Commission, wind farms there have put out about 25% of their maximum rated capacity in the last few decades), the Wind energy developers claim that the new design of turbines prevent raptor mortality, yet the following video of a vulture colliding with a turbine in Spain tells a more accurate story: <http://www.windaction.org/videos/23904>.



Wind energy developers consistently underplay the impacts large wind farms would have on sage grouse by saying that few individuals die in rotor collisions, in a clever attempt to deflect the larger impacts of wind developments fragmenting vast patches of old-growth sagebrush habitats needed by the birds for breeding. Roads, foundation pads for turbines, herbicide treatments, all have documented negative effects to sagebrush stands and sage grouse populations. Due to the controversy of both fossil-fuel and renewable energy development across the sagebrush sea, the Fish and Wildlife Service is again being forced to review the petition to list the species as federally threatened. Pygmy rabbits, requiring tall, dense sagebrush stands for cover, were found on the site. The BLM review stated that they would have to move.

Bat Conservation International studies show how bats may even be attracted to wind turbines as possible new perch sites and insect foraging areas, but make deadly collisions with rotors, both slow- and fast-moving. Pressure from rotating turbines has been found to expand the lungs of bats, causing death.

We stood on the side of the highway on a cold fall day with BLM personnel, looking across the wide basin that would be studded with steel tur-

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bines. Looking the other way we admired the bat cave up on a gray cliff of the Snake Range, lofty Wheeler Peak looming above it in the distance. We asked how the BLM would mitigate for bat impacts from this wind farm so close? They told us "intensive mortality studies" would be carried out after the wind project was built. Mitigation would be a "design feature" later, in case bat deaths were high. We laughed—would the wind company truly consider cutting turbine operation during crucial migration times for the bat? "We are curious," said BLM. "We all want the data."

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In an "off the record" conversation, a Nevada BLM employee who shall remain anonymous, told us that Spring Valley Wind LLC is only being reviewed with an Environmental Assessment with a short thirty day review period so the company can secure Federal grants and tax breaks by a 2010 deadline. (Although we just found out that the deadline has been extended to 2012.) We believe it is only fair that they prepare a full Environmental Impact Statement under the National Environmental Policy Act and provide the public with a much longer review period. If you have a minute, you can ask them to do this too. The official BLM information can be found here: . [http://www.blm.gov/nv/st/en/fo/ely\\_field\\_office/blm\\_programs/energy/spring\\_valley\\_wind.html](http://www.blm.gov/nv/st/en/fo/ely_field_office/blm_programs/energy/spring_valley_wind.html). Letters need to be sent by January 15th to: BLM Ely District Office, HC 33 Box 33500, Ely, NV 89301 attn: Project Manager Wells McGiffert. Comments may be submitted electronically to [springvalley@blm.gov](mailto:springvalley@blm.gov)

The renewable green economy is not living up to its commitment to the environment. It seems to have been designed for quick subsidies for energy developers. Somewhere lost in the process was respect for the creatures we share this place with. When the energy developers say "jump. The BLM does not have to always ask; How high?"

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The Mojave and Great Basin Deserts -- home to a wide range of biodiverse communities, including people. Our aim is to celebrate the diversity of life here and highlight the threats to our desert home. This place is more than a wilderness, it is a living landscape, full of unique plants, animals, fungi, and people.

This site covers the geographic area of Mojave, Colorado, and Great Basin deserts centering around Nevada and California, but also venturing into Oregon, Idaho, Utah, and Arizona. We especially explore the areas ignored by others (but cherished by many): the vast creosote and sagebrush flats, white playas, rocky hills, and pinyon-juniper mountains. These are not "wastelands" but vibrant, rich, beautiful landscapes that we call home.

Contact us at: [editors@basinandrangewatch.org](mailto:editors@basinandrangewatch.org)

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