

ASAHI SHIMBUN

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Move to protect birds from wind turbines

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Wind turbines, such as these lining the shore in Horonobe, Hokkaido, present a deadly hazard to birds. (Sohei Kamata/ The Asahi Shimbun)

ASAHIKAWA, Hokkaido--Wind turbines that grace the terrain of this northern region may soon be painted fire-engine red and lit up at night: not for aesthetic reasons, but to stop low-flying birds from crashing into the whirling blades.

With reports of rare bird species being killed off by wind turbines in Hokkaido and elsewhere, companies that operate them are scrambling to find effective yet economically viable methods to make the units more environmentally friendly.

Tokyo-based Japan Wind Development Co. began operating seven wind turbines in the Atsumi Peninsula in Aichi Prefecture in December.

It says it will simply shut down operations if birds get too close.

The company's business plan stipulates that it will "collect data on the migration patterns of birds of prey and other bird species, and when a serious accident is anticipated, reassess operations--including the halting of the wind turbines."

A company official said, "Our plants are outside bird migration routes, but if a bird flies too close, we are prepared to stop the turbines."

Tokyo Electric Power Co. invented and patented a radar system that can spot birds so that it can automatically halt turbines. The company aims to make the system available on a commercial basis.

Eurus Energy Holdings Corp., which operates 10 wind farms across the nation, had the bright idea of making its units more visible to birds by lighting them up during the night.

It will light up its Wakkani wind farm in Hokkaido, located next to the Soya Kaikyo waterway. In addition, it plans to repaint 20 turbines in Tomamae on the Sea of Japan side fire-engine red to make the them stand out.

One official at wind energy firm Eco Power Co. said: "Experts are divided over whether lighting and repainting them will be effective. No one really knows how to prevent bird strikes."

Though the blades may seem to rotate in a leisurely manner, the tips of the wind rotors attain speeds close to 200 kph.

An official at another wind power company said: "Collisions occur at the rate of one or two birds per wind turbine per year. But no hard data exists to confirm this. And there is no way to assess the problem, or even prove we have a problem."

The Wild Bird Society of Japan has received reports of at least 20 bird strikes in the past few years.

The society has reported that six endangered white-tailed sea eagles have been killed in collisions with wind turbines in Hokkaido since 2004, and a misago osprey, a fish-eating hawk that is also endangered, was found dead from a collision in Goto, Nagasaki Prefecture.

"Birds of prey often lose sight of the wind turbine when they get too close to the rotating blades," commented Yukihiro Kominami, who is head of the Conservation Section of the Wild Bird Society of Japan.

Kominami said birds killed in turbine collisions are often devoured or carried off by wild animals. "We are finding only a very limited number of specimens," he commented.(IHT/Asahi: January 4,2007)



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