

# Area wind farms up and running

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HARLINGEN — Two large-scale wind farms in South Texas are now operational despite the protests of environmental advocates who spent months trying to halt the projects.

Many of the approximately 250 wind turbines that were expected to dot about 20,000 acres of Kenedy Ranch north of Raymondville are up and spinning, confirmed spokespeople from two wind-energy companies. Neither of the farms is yet generating energy at full capacity, though - technicians are still testing turbines and not all are connected to the electrical grid.

But the wind farms, which together ultimately will generate almost 500 megawatts of electricity, both move closer to operating at full strength each day, the wind developers reported.

"We expect to be fully operational by early next year," said Matt Dallas, a spokesman for Babcock & Brown, developer of the Gulf Wind project in Kenedy County.

Jan Johnson, a spokeswoman for Iberdrola Renewables, said she didn't immediately know when all turbines at the Peñascal Wind project would be online.

"We're bringing on turbines and testing each one individually," Johnson said. "That power is already on the grid."

Once both farms are completely online, they could generate enough electricity for more than 100,000 homes, according to data from the American Wind Energy Association.

The turbines - about 375 to 400 feet tall from the base to tip of the blades - are visible from some portions of the Lower Laguna Madre, said Walt Kittelberger, president of the Lower Laguna Madre Foundation, which has opposed the wind farms.

"I've watched them as they've gone up," he said.

Seeing the turbines starting to spin is worrisome, Kittelberger said.

"I think they were built without public input, and built (with developers) knowing they would kill thousands of birds," he said.

A group of environmental organizations, including Lower Laguna Madre Foundation, King Ranch and others, has opposed the projects from the start. The group, known as the Coastal Habitat Alliance, says the wind farms are on a major migratory pathway for birds, and that tall, rapidly spinning turbines on that pathway could lead to

bird kills. The group sued the wind developers, the General Land Office and members of the Public Utility Commission board late last year, calling for a public hearing to be held on the farms' construction, and later filed a petition to stop construction - all to no avail. The lawsuit, filed in federal court, was dismissed in August.

In an environmental review commissioned by the alliance, Colorado-based consultants EDM International determined that the location was "among the worst that can be found on any piece of private land in Texas." The region's coastal wetlands are a popular stopping point for migrating birds, the review said.

The wind developers have denied that the farms will pose a significant risk to birds.

Although the turbines are already spinning on Kenedy Ranch, the alliance still hasn't given up, said Jim Blackburn, an Austin environmental attorney and the group's founder.

"We continue to believe and assert (that Texas) has violated the Coastal Zone Management Act," Blackburn said.

That federal law requires environmental reviews of any electricity-generating plants.

After the federal lawsuit was dismissed, the alliance filed complaints with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Federal Aviation Administration, asking for the government to conduct environmental assessments of Texas' wind farms. These farms need regulation to avoid negative impacts on birds and habitat, Blackburn said.

Although it's probably too late to halt the existing projects, Blackburn said, it's not too late to push for Texas wind farms to have more environmental oversight, he said.

The developers of Kenedy County's wind farms already have made some concessions because of environmental concerns, including agreeing to monitor bird traffic and shut down turbines during high migration times, he said.

"I would have loved to have stopped (the farms) - I don't think they belong there," Blackburn said. "But the second step was to improve them, and I think we have, substantially."

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