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WILDLIFE: Lawmakers push bill to address bird population decline (07/11/2008)

This story was updated at 9:52 a.m. to correct the number of birds killed yearly by wind turbines.

Patrick Reis, E&E Daily reporter

Amid dire warnings from biologists and Bush administration officials about declining U.S. bird populations, a bipartisan coalition of House Natural Resource Committee are pushing legislation to increase funding for conservation efforts.

Reps. Ron Kind (D-Wis.) and Wayne Gilchrest (R-Md.) are behind [H.R. 5756](#), which would reauthorize the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Improvement Act, incrementally increasing its funding from a current \$6 million to \$20 million by 2015.

The act, set to expire in 2010, allocates grants to protect bird populations that migrate between the United States and other countries and requires three-quarters of the grant money to go to habitat preservation efforts outside the United States. For every dollar of federal money allocated, three must be raised from private donors. The \$26.2 million spent so far has been paired with \$116 million in private contributions.

The act has a proven track record of success, but two-thirds of qualified applicants are turned down for lack of funding, Kind said. He added the need for funding was becoming more urgent as soaring agricultural commodity prices encourage farmers to break conservation agreements and return sensitive lands to production.

Paul Schmidt, assistant director of the Migratory Birds Program for the Fish and Wildlife Service, said the act is an important part of the conservation puzzle but stopped short of specifically endorsing an increase in funding at a House Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans Subcommittee hearing yesterday.

40 years. "We know that there are rare and endangered species, but most of us think of the common birds we see so often in our backyards and local parks as invulnerable," Bancroft said. "We now know that this is not the case."

Among those species are waterfowl prized by hunters. By failing to protect ducks and the wetlands they inhabit, Congress is jeopardizing the \$2.3 billion duck hunting contributes to the economy, according to biologist Dale Humburg of Ducks Unlimited.

Conflicts with wind energy

To meet the president's request that 20 percent of the nation's energy comes from renewable sources by 2030, the number of turbines would have to increase 30-fold. At current mortality rates, the wind industry would be killing between 900,000 and 1.8 million birds per year, according to George Wallace of the American Bird Conservancy.

Subcommittee Chairwoman Madeleine Bordallo (D-Guam) recommended that any extension of the renewable energy tax credit include language that requires turbines to be fitted with best available technology for wildlife mitigation.

But best available technology is difficult to pin down, as needs vary from one site to the next, according to Laurie Jodziewicz, manager of siting policy at the American Wind Energy Association.

Jodziewicz said many misconceptions about the effects of wind energy on birds stem from the Altamont Pass wind project in California where an abnormally high number of raptors were killed.

The industry is working to develop new aspects that minimize impacts on wildlife, including reducing turbine speeds during times of peak bird activity and equipping turbines with light and sound equipment to passively drive wildlife away, she added.

"Wildlife protection is certainly something that we've been taking very seriously," Jodziewicz said. "Certainly there are impacts from wind development but there are impacts from other sources, and we want to be put on an equal playing field with any other sources of energy, which are usually more polluting."