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Contact: Amy Rutledge
Communications Manager
Phone: 1-218-723-7400
arutledge@mnpower.com

NEWS

Minnesota Power working to help whooping cranes and new Bison Wind project share the same pathway

Duluth, Minn.—To prevent birds from flying into transmission lines linked to a new wind energy project in North Dakota, Minnesota Power has installed thousands of bird flight diverters.

Foot-long corkscrews molded from plastic and then twisted onto high-voltage electric lines have been shown to prevent death and injury to birds. The Duluth, Minn.-based electric utility's efforts are aimed at protecting the endangered whooping crane.

Minnesota Power installed about 15,000 bird flight diverters across 44 miles of transmission line over the past two weeks. About half the devices were attached to a new transmission line connecting the 76-megawatt Bison I wind farm now under construction near New Salem, N.D. to the existing transmission network near Center, N.D.

The remaining flight diverters were fitted onto an existing direct current transmission line purchased by Minnesota Power earlier this year to transport renewable energy from wind-rich North Dakota to the utility's home territory 465 miles away near Duluth. Minnesota Power has worked cooperatively with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on the Bison project, which is located within the whooping crane's migratory flyway.

"We want to be the company that's done all the things it could do to protect wildlife and contribute to a better environment," said Dave Schmitz, general manager of renewable operations in North Dakota for Minnesota Power., an operating division of ALLETE, Inc. (NYSE: ALE) Installation of the bird flight diverters will cost approximately \$500,000.

Since the formation of the Avian Power Line Interaction Committee in 1989, the electric utility industry and the USFWS have worked together to reduce avian mortality. Tom Stehn, U.S. Fish and Wildlife's whooping crane coordinator based at the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas Gulf Coast, said the bird flight diverters make transmission lines more visible to winged creatures.

"Birds of all kinds and whooping cranes in particular collide with power lines because they fail to see them," Stehn said. "The bird's vision is different than ours. For one thing, their eyes are more on the sides of their heads. If a bird does see a wire at the last minute, then they will make an evasive movement to try to avoid it. If you're a small bird like a sparrow, you can dodge it. If you're a bigger bird, like a whooping crane, you're just not as adept at making a rapid evasive maneuver."

Stehn said research has shown that installing bird flight diverters can reduce the chance of birds striking power lines by anywhere from 50 percent to 80 percent. Whooping cranes, the tallest birds in North America and one of only two crane species native to the continent, are among the most threatened bird species in the U.S. There are only 263 whooping cranes who use the flyway Minnesota Power is helping protect, and 535 in total (including non-migratory) by Stehn's most recent count.

"The all time low was 15 whooping cranes, in 1941," Stehn said.

Minnesota Power and its contractors installed the bird flight diverters on the highest wires of the new transmission line that ties the Bison wind farm to an electric substation near Center, N.D. On the 22 miles stretch of existing, energized DC Line running from North Dakota to Duluth, the diverters were installed by helicopter.

Stehn said utilities across the country are incorporating bird diverters on most, if not all, new transmission lines seen as a threat to bird populations. He acknowledged that it's more difficult to affix the diverters to existing lines carrying high voltage electricity.

Minnesota Power has agreed to equip 22 miles of new line and 22 miles of existing line with the bird diverters in keeping with research that shows the devices to be approximately 50 to 80 percent effective against avian mortality. Stehn was told that Minnesota Power had started installing 15,000 bird diverters to protect the endangered cranes he's charged with protecting.

"That's a very impressive effort," Stehn said. "The species is so rare we've got to help wherever we can."

Minnesota Power supplies electric service to 144,000 retail customers, 16 municipalities and some of the largest industrial customers in the United States.

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