

# Montana Wildlife & Wind Energy Virtual Workshop

## Meeting Summary

April 27 & 29, May 4 & 6, 2021

Workshop Website: <https://awwi.org/montana-wind-wildlife-workshop/>

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### **Overview**

AWWI and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks co-hosted a four-day virtual workshop with the goal of creating a foundation for dialogue, sharing information, and working collaboratively to develop strategies for minimizing wildlife conflict while expanding wind energy.

The workshop included presentations from more than 30 speakers from state agencies, the wind industry, conservation and advocacy organizations, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, academic researchers, on the following topic areas ([view full agenda](#)):

- State of wind energy nationally, regionally, and in Montana, and opportunities and challenges for development in the state
- Siting and development processes and constraints
- Permitting and approvals relevant to wind energy in Montana
- Application of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Wind Energy Guidelines
- State-of-the-science on impacts and solutions for relevant species and habitats in Montana

### **Themes and Takeaways**

Key themes and takeaways that arose during the presentations and that were identified in the group discussions included:

- There is tension at national, regional, and state levels between building out renewables to meet the climate challenge while mitigating impacts/prioritizing conservation – and there is uncertainty about how to achieve both.
- There is uncertainty about the future of new wind energy development in Montana, particularly due to current transmission constraints.
- There is interest in understanding the potential for wind energy development on public lands, and what challenges and opportunities this could present.
- We've come a long way in understanding wind-wildlife interactions, but there is still uncertainty in wind-wildlife science and a need to get a more complete picture on key research gaps, for example:
  - Bat species of concern: hoary, silver-haired and eastern red bats. Implementing operational mitigation measures is very important; may be more important than siting for bats. More data or research on the effectiveness of different curtailment regimes would be helpful.

- Quantifying habitat-based impacts (such as displacement impacts on species) and habitat conservation and mitigation approaches.
- Questions that have not been addressed in the research, such as impacts to insects/pollinators.
- The cumulative impacts of many wind energy projects concentrated in a geographic location.
- Reducing uncertainty around research gaps will require a large effort – long term monitoring, improved data sharing, significant collaboration.
- A recurring takeaway was state agencies highlighting the importance and value of developers reaching out as early as possible in project planning. State agency staff acknowledged that it can be challenging for developers to communicate with them.
- Additionally, state agencies identified a need for inter-agency collaboration and improved coordination.
- Several opportunities identified in the group discussion focused on collaborative science (data sharing, updating and sharing GIS mapping tools, refining and implementing operational mitigation such as smart curtailment).
  - A key opportunity discussed was working now to address research gaps, improve processes and communications, and build relationships in advance of a bigger push for wind development in Montana, so that practitioners in the state have anticipated and are prepared for increased buildout.
- Challenges identified included:
  - How to plan ahead when there is uncertainty about future development, the complexity of the permitting process, and how to address challenging research gaps such as for species that are not well studied.
  - Uncertainty about support for wind energy from within the state, including concerns from local communities about job loss and encroaching on public lands.

### **Next Steps**

The group discussions identified both broad and specific next steps for practitioners in Montana:

- Specific, short-term next steps for improving communication and resource-sharing among and across stakeholder groups:
  - Create a “wind resource repository” webpage that is a centralized resource for developers and agencies, with links to the relevant tools (e.g. mapping tools, available data) agencies, permitting resources, and contact information.
  - Reconvening the workshop Planning Committee to discuss specific plans for carrying the conversation forward was identified as a first step.
- Broader, long term ideas:
  - Collaborating on and implementing research priorities and solutions, including:
    - Collaborate between agencies and developers on flexible solutions, such as operational minimization strategies and encouraging the use of the Montana bat recommendations – and maybe develop incentives.
    - Explore possibilities for shifting some investment in post-construction monitoring to mitigation.
    - Commit to information and data sharing.

- Creating specific opportunities to improve interagency collaboration, such as establishing an interagency working group, with the goal of understanding the different missions and objectives and improving coordination on permitting and planning.
- The overarching next step was to continue the conversation and build off of the proactive nature of the workshop, such as by:
  - Creating an ongoing working group, using regular meetings as a platform to invite speakers to continue with information-sharing and relationship-building.
  - Potentially holding annual workshops to discuss progress on priority issues.