RED ELÉCTRICA DE ESPAÑA
Saving birds from high wire collisions

The European Business Awards for the Environment have a special section for biodiversity protection. Red Eléctrica De España won this year’s award for their efforts to protect birds on the wing.

Red Eléctrica de España (REE), operator of Spain’s national power transmission system, has built some 300 km of transmission lines each year over the past decade. Birds are one of its main challenges: not just those that build their nests on pylons and affect maintenance, but in particular those that collide with cables during flight.

‘If we place a power line in an area rich in birdlife it’s likely that birds will collide with the line,’ says Mercedes Gil del Pozo, a biologist who works for REE.


The operator worked with the Spanish National Research Council and conservation consultancy Asistencias Técnicas CLAVE to create a tool using Geographical Information Systems to map the flight paths of 45 bird species. Species were selected for their conservation status and sensitivity to the negative effects of power transmission lines.

The tool integrates data about bird flight paths to help reduce the impact on birds of new power lines, and to prioritise mitigation measures on existing lines.
Some 14 of Spain’s 17 autonomous communities now share their data and so are covered by the mapping tool, which is regularly updated. The map of Spain should be complete by the end of 2015.

Bird strikes don’t affect power supplies or damage the lines, but the problem can delay planning processes significantly. ‘When we apply to build a line in an important bird area, it can take more than 10 years to gain authorisation, compared to two or three years if the route is well selected from the start,’ she says.

‘By taking bird protection into account, the project facilitates decision-making for planning and building new transmission infrastructure, and for managing the existing power grid. It also promotes transparency in the public information process and public consultation’, she adds.

The mapping tool helps to identify collision high-risk areas, providing useful data for mitigation measures. Spirals and reflective x-shaped devices for this purpose are fixed to power lines to make them more visible.

The project has received a warm welcome. It also has good potential for replication in other sectors like lower voltage power lines and wind turbines, and other infrastructure such as railways and roads.

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Presented every two years, the awards recognise businesses that have taken steps to improve their environmental performance and contribute to sustainable economic development. Companies compete in five categories, which reward green innovation in management, product and services, process, international business cooperation, or in combining business and biodiversity.

Businesses of any size, from any sector, can compete. Standards are high, as the competitors are already ‘the best of the best’: to enter the European Business Awards for the Environment, you need to have been a finalist in a national competition first.

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