

Giant cage could help cut number of burned birds over NJ Meadowlands

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Soon, there should be fewer birds getting burned or killed by an invisible flame as they fly over the New Jersey Meadowlands.

Installation has begun of a giant cagelike structure about seven stories tall around an invisible flame at a local landfill to prevent raptors and other [birds](#) from flying through and getting singed or incinerated.

That's good news to Don Torino, president of the Bergen County Audubon Society, who has complained about the issue for years to the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority, which oversees the closed Kingsland Landfill in Lyndhurst.

Torino and other birders who have visited the landfill have seen many raptors with singed wing and [tail feathers](#), and some that were so damaged they could not fly.

To address the problem, the agency had asked for advice from experts and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Most were stumped, but Public Service Electric and Gas Co. came up with a design for a giant cage around the flame.

"It feels good that they've listened and are finally doing something about it," Torino said. "There were no other methods out there that they could copy. They're giving it a good shot.

"It certainly will help with the bigger raptors," Torino said. "Small birds

might still be a concern. But it's certainly better than where we were."

The agency recently paid PSE&G \$65,000 to install eight poles, each 75 feet high, to create the frame for a cage around the pipe that burns off methane from the landfill. Bacteria generate methane in landfills as they break down buried waste.

As a regulated utility, PSE&G is not permitted to donate labor and materials, said Brooke Houston, a spokeswoman for the utility. "We are performing the work for NJSEA at cost," she said.

The sports authority plans to seek bids from contractors to complete the project by installing chain link fencing around the poles from their tops down about 20 feet to the flame. There will be no fencing across the top of the poles like a roof, because the agency didn't want to encourage birds to land there above the flame, said agency spokesman Brian Aberback.

Red-tailed hawks, ospreys and kestrels - small hawks with declining populations and considered threatened in New Jersey - were among the birds found with singed wing or tail feathers. Some were taken to the Raptor Trust in Morris County for rehabilitation, but it takes a year or more for most birds to regrow feathers.

Birds with injured tail and wing feathers have a tough time hunting for prey and are not likely to survive migration as winter approaches, said Chris Soucy, director of the Raptor Trust.

Despite seeking out consultants and other experts to address the issue, the sports authority was stymied in part because there isn't a national standard for how to protect birds from being injured or killed by such flames.

Many of the methods already being used across the country to reduce the problem call for the stacks to have intermittent flames, not flames that burn continuously as in the Meadowlands.

Consultants had suggested such things as mechanical modifications of the stack and putting in an additive that makes the heat visible to the birds.

"If this were a simple problem, something would have been done about it a long time ago," Torino said.

The sports authority set out to design a structure that birds would be familiar with avoiding, such as a building, Aberback said. He said that even with the structure only partially completed, officials have not seen birds approach it.

"The deterrent will appear to birds as a solid building, which will discourage birds of all sizes from flying near it," he said.

Experts say such methane flares at landfills endanger birds across the country. Raptors are protected under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and landfill operators could be liable for up to \$15,000 for each injured bird.

Last fall the sports authority cut down trees around the [flame](#) to make it less attractive to raptors and other birds that like to perch in the area while hunting for prey.

Torino said the problem is worse during migration season, when smaller birds are attracted to the grassy habitat. Unlike the larger hawks and other raptors, many smaller birds are unlikely to recover from their injuries.

Torino said he has seen small savannah sparrows, a threatened species in New Jersey, get burned and then drop helplessly into the vegetation.

"I just hope they can finish the project before the fall bird migration starts, which isn't that far away," Torino said. The project should be finished in September, Aberback said, and the final cost won't be known until then.

The Kingsland Landfill was closed in 1988 and remediated in the 1990s. It has attracted kestrels and other raptors because it provides the kind of critical grassland they prefer, which has been declining in the region. The grassland provides good hunting habitat for the birds, which catch mice and other rodents. The site has even attracted some snowy owls in recent winters.

Sports authority officials have said that they would like to negotiate a contract with a company to capture the methane at the [landfill](#) and use it to produce energy, eliminating the need to flare it off.

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