

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

Environmental Assessment
For Proposed Issuance of an Eagle Take Permit
For the
Grand Meadow and Pleasant Valley Wind Farms
Dodge and Mower Counties, Minnesota
April 2020

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, we, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) to analyze the impacts to the human environment associated with a bald eagle incidental take permit (ITP) application and the included Eagle Conservation Plan (ECP; Attachment A to the EA) for the Grand Meadow (GMWF) and Pleasant Valley (PVWF) Wind Farms (Project). Northern States Power Company – Minnesota dba Xcel Energy (the Applicant) operates the Project in Dodge and Mower counties, Minnesota. The Project consists of 67, 1.5-megawatt GE SLE turbines (GMWF) and 100, 2.0-megawatt Vestas V100 turbines (PVWF) and other associated infrastructure. The Project became operational in 2008 (GMWF) and 2015 (PVWF). The Applicant requested a 5-year ITP for operational activities of the Project to take up to six bald eagles over the 5-year permit term. The Service acknowledges that this estimate is likely a conservative estimate and protects eagles by ensuring that authorized take is not over-allocated across the population.

The EA analysis tiers off of the Eagle Rule Revision Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS; Service 2016). Two alternatives were analyzed within the EA titled *Issuance of an Eagle Take Permit for the Grand Meadow and Pleasant Valley Wind Farms*. The alternatives assessed included a No Action Alternative (no permit issued) and the Proposed Alternative: issue an ITP per the ECP (Attachment A to the EA). The Proposed Alternative allows the Applicant to operate a commercially viable wind energy facility while complying with the preservation standard set forth by the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act to maintain stable or increasing bald eagle populations (74 CFR 46836; 2009). The Applicant would be limited to the proposed take of bald eagles that is within the limits of the take thresholds analyzed in the 2016 PEIS.

Preliminary coordination letters were sent to seven tribes that were identified to have potential interests or resources near the Project on April 6, 2019. No responses were received from those tribes contacted. Prior to the start of the public comment period, we reached out to ten tribes to notify them of the availability of the draft EA. The Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux responded with several questions about eagle fatalities at wind farms and the Service's process of issuing eagle take permits. This comment and our response are included in the administrative record, and summarized in the final EA.

The Service published the Draft EA on the Midwest Region's Eagle Permit website on December 13, 2019, opening a 30-day comment period. There were no substantive comments received from the public comment period within the scope of the EA; therefore, no changes to the Draft EA were necessary based on public input. The Service did receive additional internal comment which prompted a number of revisions to the final EA from the draft version. The more substantive changes include: update to the federally listed species described in the Section 7 consultation (Section 1.4.2), summary of collision risk modeling for golden eagle (Section 3.2),

and update to other permitted take to include the MidAmerican Wind Projects take numbers (Section 4.2.1.4).

The Service developed the EA and FONSI in accordance with NEPA of 1969, as amended, and the Council on Environmental Quality's Regulations for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA (40 CFR 1500-1508). The Service concludes that, with the implementation of the measures outlined in the EA and ECP, the Preferred Alternative for issuance of an ITP to the Project will not result in significant impacts to the quality of the human environment including bald eagles.

Therefore, it is my determination that the Preferred Alternative is not a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under NEPA Section 102(2)(c). Accordingly, an Environmental Impact Statement is not required and the environmental review under NEPA is concluded with this FONSI (43 CFR 46.325). The Final EA prepared in support of this FONSI is incorporated by reference and attached (Attachment 1); these documents are also available on the Region 3 Eagle Permits webpage.

Tom Cooper
Chief, Interior Region 3 Migratory Bird Program
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Date

REFERENCES

40 CFR (Code of Federal Regulations) §§1500-1508. 1970. Title 40 - Protection of Environment; Chapter V - Council on Environmental Quality; Parts 1500-1508. 40 CFR 1500 1508. [NEPA, the Environmental Quality Improvement Act of 1970, as amended (42 United States Code [USC] 4371 et seq.), section 309 of the Clean Air Act, as amended (42 USC 7609} and Executive Order (EO) 11514, March 5, 1970, as amended by EO 11991, May 24, 1977).].

43 CFR 46. 2008. Title 43 - Public Lands: Interior; Part 46 – Implementation of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. 43 Cfr 46. [73 Federal Register (FR) 61314, October 15, 2008, unless otherwise noted.]. Available online: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CFR-2011-title43-voll/pdf/CFR-2011-title43-voll-part46.pdf>