



State of Washington
DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

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June 12, 2024

Chace Pederson
Staff Planner
Kittitas County Community Development Services
411 N. Ruby St. Suite 2
Ellensburg, WA 98926

SUBJECT: RE: CU-24-00003 Schnebly Coulee Solar Farm - Notice of Application

Dear Mr. Pederson,

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) is committed to working with renewable energy projects to ensure that these projects are sited in a manner that aligns with our agency's mandate to perpetuate fish, wildlife, and their habitat (Regulatory Code of Washington (RCW) 77.04.012) and that fully support goals for decarbonization in Washington State.

Schnebly Coulee Solar Energy LLC (applicant) has coordinated with WDFW regarding biological surveys, vegetation management, and mitigation for shrubsteppe impacts since 2018. Based on biological reports and information offered in the SEPA Checklist, WDFW feels that the applicant has done due diligence to assess and minimize impacts to wildlife but that Chapter 17A.01, Sections 17A.01.100 and 17A.04.070 (Mitigation Requirements and Critical Areas Mitigation-completion of a Mitigation Plan) have not been fulfilled by the applicant. Section 4.1.2.1 of the Habitat Management Plan states that the 625-acre project area is composed of shrub/scrub (79%) and grassland/herbaceous (18%). These habitat types are considered shrubsteppe per WDFW Priority Habitat and Species (PHS) data. This is a priority habitat and required to be mitigated per Kittitas County Critical Area Ordinance (CAO) under Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas 17A.04. As a result, the proper designation is not a determination of nonsignificance (DNS), but a mitigated determination of nonsignificance (MDNS). Additionally, this area is mapped as a high conservation area by the Washington Columbia Plateau Least Conflict Solar Siting tool (<https://wsuenergy.databasesin.org/>).

The applicant's current Habitat Management Plan provides details about mitigation but excludes important information regarding conservation easement management and transmission line impacts. However, there has been ongoing discussion between WDFW and the applicant to develop appropriate management strategies for the planned conservation easement, address transmission line impacts, and to incorporate these factors into a Mitigation Plan and updated Habitat Management Plan. We have a few comments regarding the submitted application materials below.

Suggested MDNS language is: “The applicant shall prepare a habitat mitigation plan in conjunction with WDFW to mitigate for loss of critical areas, at a ratio of at least 2:1 for impacts to all priority habitat identified on the project, namely shrubsteppe habitat. These impacts are for all elements within the project fence line and all permanent impacts such as roads and transmission line outside of the fence line.”

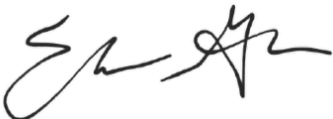
To achieve a MDNS, WDFW requests that the following be addressed:

- A mitigation plan be drafted to include requirements outlined in Chapter 17A.01, Sections 17A.01.100 and 17A.04.070 and the following details previously agreed to between WDFW and the applicant;
 - Mitigation of at least a 2:1 ratio for all permanent impacts to priority habitats identified on the project site
 - Mitigation actions could include:
 - Specification of parcels to be managed by the applicant as conservation easements
 - Collection of sagebrush seed from vegetation being removed before construction
 - Incorporation of wildlife friendly elk exclusion specifications into the solar perimeter fence with modifications to allow small wildlife movement within the project
- The applicant works with WDFW to create terms for the conservation easement which could include, but not be limited to; protection of land for the life of the project, grazing at or below current levels, and no loss of habitat value by grazing, recreation, or other factors within control of the applicant.
- The applicant specify the exact location and impact acres of the transmission line. These impact acres should be mitigated at a 2:1 ratio due to shrubsteppe impacts and be excluded from the conservation easement.

WDFW looks forward to continuing coordination with the applicant to finalize mitigation, limit impacts to important wildlife and habitat resources, and develop an effective habitat management plan.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. Please contact me at 509-699-9859 or Emily.Grabowsky@dfw.wa.gov with any questions.

Sincerely,



Emily Grabowsky
Solar and Wind Energy Biologist

cc:

Michael Ritter, WDFW Lead Planner Solar & Wind Energy Development

Michelle Huppert, WDFW Solar and Wind Energy Biologist
Scott Downes, WDFW Fish and Wildlife Habitat Regional Land Use Planner
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