

Thank you for your comment, Rob McKim.

The comment tracking number that has been assigned to your comment is UGPW\_S50020.

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Upper Great Plains Wind PEIS

Comment ID: UGPW\_S50020

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Privacy Preference: Don't withhold name or address from public record

Attachment: TNC wind PEIS comment.pdf

Comment Submitted:

[See Attachment.](#)



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November 9, 2008

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To Whom It May Concern:

Thank you for considering these comments, submitted by The Nature Conservancy's Central U.S. Conservation Region, regarding the proposed programmatic environmental impact statement (PEIS) to evaluate wind energy development in Iowa, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a private non-profit organization which strives to preserve the natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth. Established in 1951, TNC works in more than 30 countries and all 50 U.S. states. To date, TNC has more than one million members and has conserved more than 134 million acres worldwide.

We appreciate the foresight and leadership of the agencies initiating this PEIS effort. This process provides a critical opportunity for assessing landscape level and cumulative impacts of both wind energy development and associated electrical grid expansion. Without an inclusive assessment of cumulative impacts across the PEIS area and across the ranges of species with large-landscape habitat requirements, the known and suspected impacts of wind energy development cannot be fully considered, avoided, or mitigated.

Of particular importance is the appropriateness of this PEIS under NEPA and associated laws. Without completing such an analysis, the involved federal agencies would not have access to information essential to appropriate decisions regarding proposed wind energy development and requests for connections to WPA grids. We believe that the rapid growth in wind energy development, the relatively incomplete and varying regulatory framework applicable to the industry, and both the known and as yet not fully understood impacts of such development on wildlife and habitats combine to make this PEIS of particular importance.

While we support the PEIS process for its potential beneficial outcomes, we request that certain concerns and provisions be specifically addressed as the PEIS is developed and that the scope of

the proposed PEIS be modified accordingly. The combined concerns and requests of TNC are stated below.

1. The PEIS should not provide for establishment of categorical exclusions for individual or grouped wind energy development projects, regardless of whether they are or are not sited on federally owned lands. There will still be a requirement for individual environmental assessments and in many cases full Environmental Impact Statements regarding federal actions related to each wind energy facility. The PEIS process is not well suited to the needs for specific, detailed evaluation of impacts of the ecological footprint of individual large, commercial wind energy facilities. For some grassland obligate species, the footprint, or area in which wildlife use of habitat may be affected, extends beyond one mile for each turbine-tower assembly. We request that the PEIS, therefore, address only the cumulative impacts of wind energy development in the region, including (but not limited to) impacts on:
  - a) sensitive plant species and their communities, such as blowout penstemon (*Penstemon haydenii*), Ute's ladies'-tresses (*Spiranthes diluvialis*), eastern prairie fringed orchid (*Platanthera leucophaea*) and western prairie fringed orchid (*Platanthera praeclara*);
  - b) relatively immobile resident vertebrate and invertebrate species, such as eastern massasauga rattlesnake (*Sistrurus catenatus catenatus*), and black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*); and
  - c) state-listed endangered species, threatened species, and species of concern.
  
2. The PEIS should address broad and cumulative range-wide population-level impacts of multiple wind energy projects across entire ecosystems and on migratory species and species that require large and ecologically intact landscapes for their survival. These analyses should address:
  - a) habitat-use impacts on wide-ranging sagebrush or grassland obligate resident species, such as greater sage grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*) and greater prairie-chicken (*Tympanuchus cupido*);
  - b) disturbance-sensitive species, such as grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos horribilus*), and Canada Lynx (*Lynx canadensis*);
  - c) construction-related impacts on plant communities and invertebrates, including introduction of invasive plants, and habitat values for such species as Dakota skipper (*Hesperia dacotae*), Karner blue butterfly (*Lycadides melissa samuelis*), and Salt Creek tiger beetle (*Cicindela nevadica lincolniiana*);
  - d) disruption of migration or stopover patterns of waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, and other migrants; and
  - e) species that may realize population-level impacts due to direct collision or barotrauma events, such as whooping crane (*Grus americana*) Indiana bat (*Myotis sodalist*), piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*), and least tern (*Sterna antillarum*).
  
3. The PEIS should examine all areas within the selected region that feature wind resources of Class 3 or higher. Although higher wind classes are favored, developing technology

makes areas with wind class 3 or higher economical and therefore susceptible to development. Many of the areas are likely to entail habitats or ecosystems of concern.

4. The PEIS should identify regions, areas, and in some cases sites where wind energy development is ecologically inappropriate or incompatible, or otherwise incompatible with established uses. Wind energy resources and potential ecological conflicts have been mapped by TNC for the states addressed in the PEIS. These maps are readily available and should be an integral facet of the PEIS analysis. Such areas should include:
  - a) federal and state conservation easement lands,
  - b) federal and state wildlife refuges and state wildlife areas,
  - c) lands owned by private conservation organizations and held and managed for conservation purposes,
  - d) federal and state parks and national monuments
  - e) national forests and national grasslands
  - f) areas designated by federal or state authorities as critical habitat for threatened and endangered species or as important wildlife habitat
  - g) areas designated as key wildlife migration corridors and areas ecologically suitable for such designation
  - h) unique ecologically functional ecosystems and plant communities such as native untilled prairies, and
  - i) adequate buffer zones around all such areas.
5. The PEIS should address decommissioning standards for wind energy facilities. These standards should include rapid removal and proper disposal of towers, infrastructure, foundations, and non-functioning equipment, as well as reclamation of roadways and other infrastructure corridors and restoration of native vegetation and hydrology.
6. The PEIS should not diminish the rigor or commitment of interagency consultation regarding potential impacts on federal trust species. Each wind energy facility proposed in the project area should be examined for ESA Section 7 and Migratory Bird Act consultation needs. In addition, the PEIS should determine minimum standards for wind energy developers to consult the appropriate state wildlife agency, the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service, and science-based non-government conservation organizations, including TNC, *prior to making a significant investment in a project site.*
7. The PEIS analysis should not be confined only to those species that are currently protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (BGEPA), the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and similar statutes. This process should entail a broad examination of wildlife, habitat, and ecosystem impacts of wind energy development, including, but not limited to, the species protected under these acts, with special attention to declining grassland birds.
8. The PEIS should rely on a precautionary approach, due to the absence of conclusive data that substantiates or refutes most potential impacts on wildlife and their habitats. Contrary to the statement in the *Federal Register* notice regarding the proposed PEIS,

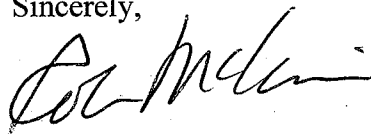
few of the ecological impacts resulting from wind energy development and its infrastructure are understood. In circumstances in which wind energy development entails an indicated (even if not fully established) high degree of risk and a low degree of certainty regarding means for abating such risk, development should be avoided or delayed until sufficient information is available to allow the risk to be adequately assessed. The PEIS should also recognize that meaningful adaptive management after construction of a commercial or community wind energy facility is not likely to address major ecological effects; operational mitigation has not proven effective in reducing most identified impacts.

Finally, we urge you to allow time for the Department of the Interior's Wind Turbine Guidelines Advisory Committee to complete its assessment of wildlife impacts and to include full consideration of the recommendations of that Committee within the defined scope of the PEIS.

The PEIS also references a plan by the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Region 6 to release certain lands currently under grassland and wetland easement to facilitate wind development. We have numerous comments to this proposal, some of which would be redundant with those listed above. Most important is that any wind energy development on Fish and Wildlife Service easements (which are considered to be part of the National Wildlife Refuge System) should be considered individually and with sufficient detail to appropriately identify implications under NEPA. In other words, it is inappropriate to include the release of FWS easements as part of the PEIS. However, since these lands may be developed, their potential development does need to be taken into account when considering the effects of cumulative impacts under the PEIS.

Thank you for considering these comments. If you have any questions or would like additional information concerning any of the matters discussed above, please contact me or TNC's Central Regional Scientist Joe Fargione at 612-331-0745, [jfargione@tnc.org](mailto:jfargione@tnc.org).

Sincerely,



Rob McKim  
Regional Director

C: Bruce Runnels, Regional Director, Rocky Mountain Region, The Nature Conservancy