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FWS/TCFO

United States Department of the Interior

U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

Twin Cities Ecological Services Field Office
4101 American Blvd E.
Bloomington, MN 55425

November 30, 2009

Mr. Scott Ek
Minnesota Office of Energy Security
85 7th Place East, Suite 500
St. Paul, Minnesota 55101-2198

Dear Mr. Ek:

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) has reviewed the October 2009 Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the Brookings County – Hampton 345 kV Transmission Line Project (Project). This letter is provided as the consolidated response of the FWS Twin Cities Ecological Services Field Office and the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge and Wetland Management District (Refuge). Our comments are based upon the information found within the DEIS or are provided to add additional support for key topics. These comments have been made with continued emphasis on preserving large wetland and lake complexes, avoiding new aerial transmission line crossing sites over the Minnesota River and minimizing impacts to permanently protected lands for the purpose of preserving corridors and habitats for migratory birds and eagles. General comment topics provided for inclusion in the final EIS are: cumulative impacts, locally specific climatic conditions, Minnesota River crossing methods, repayment rates for the estimated cost of non-aerial Minnesota River crossing, comparison of the connector routes and clarification of previously provided FWS material and labeling.

Several items were found within the DEIS which require further clarification and rewording for accuracy. These items have been listed in order reflecting how they occur within the DEIS. Comments are as follows:

- Page 4-6 of Section 4.6 contains discussion on maintenance intervals. For the estimated life of the Project, or an appropriate interval for meaningful comparison, what is the maintenance interval and costs of an aerial verses underground transmission line configuration?
- Pages 4-5 and 4-6 of Sections 4.6 and 4.7 present much information on river crossing methods such as aerial, non-aerial (submarine cable, trenching and directional boring) and line attachment to bridge structures. These crossing methods all have notable degrees of environmental impact, permitting requirements and cost estimates. To fully develop this section, cost estimates for attaching additional support structures to the Highway 169 Bridge or constructing self supporting piers directly adjacent to the Highway 169 Bridge should be provided. An additional table with this new information

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combined with that already found within the section to outline repayment rates over time would be helpful.

- Page 6-18 section 6.10 should also list FWS managed Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) and Refuge lands. Refuge lands provide six wildlife-dependent public uses including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography and environmental education and interpretation. These six “priority public uses” are outlined in the 1997 National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. The section should also describe in separate boxes; “What is a Waterfowl Production Area?” and “What are Refuge Lands?” WPAs and Refuge lands are scattered throughout the Project area as outlined in the DEIS maps.
- Page 6-21 of Section 6.11.3 identifies the Le Sueur Treatment Pond Crossing. It is our understanding that this facility will soon be retired. The DEIS does not mention the likely plans for the facility when it is retired. Future use of the treatment ponds as wildlife habitat will not be mutually compatible within an aerial transmission line corridor. Regardless of whether this area has been defined as a disturbance corridor, it provides significant habitat to nesting and migrating songbirds, raptors, and waterfowl—all of which are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.
- Pages 6-24 and 6-25 of Section 6.12.2.2 discusses in some detail impacts to migratory birds related to aerial transmission lines. This section also should assess impacts to nocturnal migratory species, impacts to migratory birds and bald eagles as a result of local climatic conditions found within riverine corridors such as fog, and impacts resulting from placing transmission lines above tree canopy height within woodland habitat which is shown to increase the number of bird strikes.
- Page 6-26 of Section 6.12.2.2 references the four north-south examples for connection routes between the Proposed and Alternative route corridors located between the Cedar Mountain Substation and the Helena Substation. The “USFWS/MnDNR Route” should be renamed to “Example 4” throughout the DEIS. While this corridor has been derived from comments from these two agencies, the specific route was proposed by the Applicant. Identifying the route as a USFWS/MnDNR alternative will be misinterpreted by the public as a specific route proposed by these two agencies.
- Map 7.4-24E on page 7-122 labels land outlined by polygons as “National Wildlife Refuge.” Most polygons labeled as such are in fact portions of the Refuge’s Expansion Boundary and currently are not owned in fee title by the FWS, as this map suggests. The Mission of the Refuge is to restore and manage the ecological communities of the Lower

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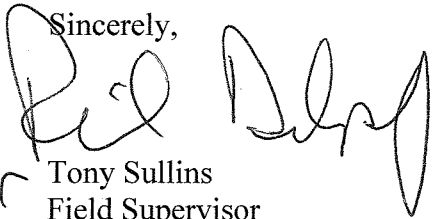
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Minnesota River Valley and its watershed while providing environmental education and wildlife dependent recreation. The Refuge is currently realigning Expansion Boundaries and already manages lands upstream of the proposed Belle Plaine crossing site; these lands are not represented on the DEIS maps. Lands within Sibley, Le Sueur, Scott, Rice and Dakota Counties are potential expansion zones for the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge or Minnesota Valley Wetland Management District.

Under Environmental Review Rules (2008 Environmental Quality Board), the Responsible Governmental Unit (RGU) is obligated to consider cumulative potential effects from other projects. No discussion has been presented in the DEIS about the potential cumulative effects from other projects to the environment in addition to this project.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment and look forward to working with you in the future. If you have questions regarding our comments, please call Tony Sullins of the Twin Cities Field Office at or (612) 725-3548 Charlie Blair of Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge at (952) 854-5900 and Chris Trosen for the location of FWS managed lands upstream of the potential Belle Plaine Crossing.

Sincerely,

for 
Tony Sullins
Field Supervisor
Twin Cities ES Field Office



Charles Blair
Refuge Manager
Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge

CC: Randall Doneen, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
Craig Poorker, Great River Energy