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NGOS RESPOND TO GROWTH IN SOUTH AFRICAN WIND ENERGY SECTOR

Wind energy is a very welcome addition to the South African energy mix, and is far ‘cleaner’ than coal-fired energy generation. However, this does not mean that it is without environmental impacts. The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) and BirdLife South Africa (BLSA) are concerned about the impact that wind farms could have on birds in South Africa if developed without appropriate consideration of the possible impacts, and have joined efforts to address this proactively.

“Cumulative impacts may be the greatest threat posed by wind energy developments to avifauna,” says Jon Smallie, manager of the EWT’s Wildlife & Energy Programme (EWT-WEP). “The EIA [Environmental Impact Assessment] process does not take these cumulative impacts into account adequately. We are concerned that more and more wind farms are under application, often in close proximity to one another, particularly in the Eastern and Western Cape”.

“While a particular site may be acceptable for development from an avifaunal point of view if viewed in isolation, when neighbouring areas are also subsequently developed, the combined impact of these multiple developments on certain bird species could be significant.” says Mark Anderson, Executive Director of BirdLife South Africa.

The impact of wind energy production on birds has been documented in countries such as Spain, Denmark and the USA, where this form of energy production is more established than it is in South Africa. Whilst certain sites have proven to impact significantly on birds, others have not, proving that it is possible for wind energy infrastructure and birds to co-exist if the correct sites are chosen.

Only seven commercial size wind turbines are currently in operation in South Africa, three at the Eskom demonstration facility at Klipheuwel, and four at the private Darling wind farm. This means that our hands-on experience of the impacts of wind turbines on birds is very limited.

This results in uncertainty in assessing or predicting the likely impacts of new proposed wind farms, since we have no local data on which to base our assessment.

The recently formed EWT-BLSA partnership intends to address the situation through the following activities: proactive engagement with the wind energy industry; the commissioning of a national strategic assessment of wind energy and birds; and the ongoing provision of input into EIAs for new wind farms through comment as Interested & Affected Parties.

A national strategic assessment will assess the risks to both birds and developers by identifying, at an early stage, geographic areas of concern in South Africa where birds could be significantly impacted on by wind turbine development, and areas where impacts would be of low significance. In this way, potential risks related to birds could be identified early on, saving developers unnecessary costs and avoiding negative impacts on birds. The assessment will also identify and document different techniques to mitigate the impacts on birds where necessary, and will involve the wind energy industry in assessing the feasibility of these techniques. Much needed best practice guidelines for avifaunal assessments for EIAs will also be developed.

Since the National Energy Regulator of South Africa's (NERSA) announcement of the feed-in tariff in 2009, applications for wind energy developments (predominantly by Independent Power Producers) have been gaining momentum in South Africa. Wind energy is generally considered a far more environmentally friendly energy option than traditional coal-fired power stations because of the lack of harmful emissions, the independence from mining operations and the fact that wind is a freely available, renewable resource. Furthermore, with wind energy the power supply can be placed closer to where it is needed, eliminating the need for extensive power lines cutting across the landscape, which have major environmental impacts. Wind turbines do however impact on wildlife, and in particular on birds and bats.

The Endangered Wildlife Trust's Wildlife & Energy Programme has worked on reducing the impacts of energy infrastructure on wildlife since 1996, offering practical advice and developing mitigation measures to prevent the negative impact of power line infrastructure on wildlife, through effective partnerships with industry players such as South African electricity utility Eskom. Work has also benefited the industry by reducing the impacts of birds on the lines and providing cost effective solutions to the developer. The Programme is a world leader in the mitigation of bird/power line collisions and electrocutions.

BirdLife South Africa is one of the leading South African environmental NGOs responsible for the conservation of birds and their habitats. BLSA is part of BirdLife International and as such collaborates with other BirdLife partners around the world, including countries with a well established wind energy industry. BLSA's international partners will be asked to assist with advice when developing proactive measures to reduce the risk of wind farms on South Africa's birds.

"We believe that this partnership, in collaboration with ornithological institutions, conservationists and wind developers, will be uniquely positioned to ensure that the potential for clean wind energy is realised without undue impact on our birds", said Anderson.

"We invite any interested parties to contact us if they feel they can contribute to our work, and believe early collaboration will lead to better results for all stakeholders", requested Smallie.

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Contact: Jon Smallie
Manager
Endangered Wildlife Trust's Wildlife & Energy Programme
Tel: +27 11 486 1102
Email: jons@ewt.org.za

Or

EWT media office
Tel: +27 (0)11 486 1102
Email: media@ewt.org.za

Or

Mark D. Anderson
Executive Director
BirdLife South Africa
+27 (11) 789 1122