

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Bjorn Solar Project

Barron County, Wisconsin

Rural Utilities Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Stag Moose Solar, LLC

Prepared by:
Rural Utilities Service Staff
United States Department of Agriculture

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A. INTRODUCTION

Stag Moose Solar, LLC (Stag Moose/Applicant) plans to submit a financing request to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Utilities Service (RUS) to construct the proposed Bjorn Solar Project in Barron County, Wisconsin. RUS is considering this financing request. Prior to taking a federal action (i.e., providing financial assistance), RUS is required to complete an environmental analysis in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) (42 U.S.C. §§ 4231–4347), the Council on Environmental Quality’s (CEQ) regulations for implementing NEPA (40 CFR Parts 1500–1508), and RD’s NEPA implementing regulations, Environmental Policies and Procedures (7 CFR Part 1970). After completing an independent analysis of an environmental report prepared by Stag Moose and its consultant, RUS concurred with its scope and content. In accordance with 7 CFR § 1970.102, RUS will adopt the report and issue it as the Agency’s Environmental Assessment (EA) for the proposed Project. RUS finds that the EA is consistent with federal regulations and meets the standards for an adequate assessment. Stag Moose published a newspaper notice announcing the availability of the EA for public review in accordance with 7 CFR § 1970.102. In addition, RUS considers the proposed Project an undertaking subject to review under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), 16 USC 470(f), and its implementing regulation, “Protection of Historic Properties” (36 CFR Part 800).

B. PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE/NEED

The overall purpose of the Project is to construct an electric generating facility to provide 5 Megawatts of power to Barron County, Wisconsin. The Project is needed to meet the energy demands of this rural community while ensuring that the energy provided is renewable, affordable, and local. To meet this purpose and need, Stag Moose proposes to build a 25-acre solar photovoltaic facility. The site is adjacent to existing Barron Electric Cooperative (“BEC” or “the Cooperative”) distribution lines that would allow for ease of interconnection. Once installed, the solar facility would produce electricity which will be distributed from the Project location throughout the Cooperative’s service territory. RUS has reviewed the purpose and need for the Project and determined that the proposal would meet the RUS purpose and need.

C. ALTERNATIVES EVALUATED

1. No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, RUS would not provide financial assistance to Stag Moose and/or the proposed Project would not be constructed. This alternative would not assist Stag Moose in providing clean and renewable energy to the existing electrical grid that would service the rate payers of Barron County, Wisconsin.

2. Action Alternative (Preferred Alternative)

Under the Action Alternative, RUS would consider financing the proposed Project, and Stag Moose Solar, LLC would construct a 25-acre solar photovoltaic facility. The proposed project would consist of solar modules mounted on single axis tracking racking secured to the top of steel I-beams that have been driven into the ground. The rows of racking would be connected by a series of wires, which would be collected to a central point where they would tie into a series of inverters, which transform the direct current produced by the panels to alternating current to match the Cooperative's electrical system. Additional electrical equipment and data acquisition and communications equipment would allow for remote monitoring and maintenance. A transformer would convert the electricity produced by the solar project to the voltage of the adjacent distribution system for use by the Cooperative's members. An access road would be installed to enable access from the nearest road to this electrical equipment. An electrical line would connect this transformer to the existing Cooperative distribution line adjacent to the Project. All facilities would be less than 12 feet tall and therefore would not intrude upon an important setting or obstruct an important vista.

3. Alternatives Eliminated from Further Consideration

In addition to the No Action Alternative and Action Alternative, Stag Moose considered other technology and siting alternatives, which are documented in the Alternatives Evaluated Including the Proposed Action section of the EA.

The Action Alternative meets the purpose and need and was selected as the Preferred Alternative.

D. SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

The analyses in the EA documented that the proposed Project would have no adverse effects to land use, important farmland, formally classified lands, floodplains, wetlands, water resources, coastal resources, biological resources, cultural resources and historic properties, aesthetics, air quality, socioeconomics and environmental justice, noise, transportation, human health and safety, or corridors.

A detailed discussion of the resource categories analyzed and the consequences of the implementation of the proposed Project is presented in Sections 3.0 through 15.0 of the EA. A summary of anticipated effects on the human environment for select resources is provided below, including any mitigation measures deemed necessary to avoid or minimize effects. Stag Moose is responsible for implementing these measures.

Land Use/Farmland

The current and historical land use for the Project Area is agricultural crop cultivation. The development layout of the Project anticipates using 25 acres of the 38-acre parcel, leaving the remaining acreage to continue to be farmed. There are no Formally Classified Lands in the vicinity of the Project Area, thus none would be affected in the short- or long-term. The surrounding properties consist of agricultural fields (cultivated crops, pasture/hay), woods, and wetlands. These conditions are not anticipated to change significantly over the lifespan of the Project. Construction of the Project is not anticipated to result in changes to the land use or other characteristics of the surrounding area. In addition, the lease agreement with the landowner commits the Applicant to remove all infrastructure (modules, racking inverters, wiring, etc.), and the site would be restored to predevelopment conditions for continued agricultural use with rested and restored soils.

Biological Resources

The following Listed Threatened and Endangered Species were identified by the US Fish and Wildlife Service Information for Planning and Conservation (IPaC) tool as “may occur within the boundary of the proposed project”: Gray wolf, Northern long-eared bat, Tricolored bat, Whooping crane, Karner blue butterfly, and Monarch butterfly. In addition, the following migratory birds of concern “have the potential to occur within the Project Area”: Bald Eagle, Bobolink, Chimney Swift, and Rusty Blackbird. However, there is little to no suitable habitat in the Project Area for these species due to historical land use and cover. The Project area has been used for agriculture (specifically cultivated row crops) since at least 1939, and construction of the Project would not require clearing of mature trees or other suitable habitat for fish, wildlife, birds, or vegetation. Upon cessation of construction a native seed mix would be planted throughout. Professional vegetation maintenance crews would manage vegetation actively throughout the project life to ensure the desired native pollinator plant species thrive and invasive species are promptly eliminated.

Cultural Resources and Historic Properties

The review of cultural resources and historic properties of the Project Area indicated that there are no known archaeological or architectural resources in the Project Area or within a 500-foot buffer, and that the Project Area has not been previously surveyed for historic properties. According to the Phase I Environmental Site Assessment completed by Emmons & Olivier Resources, Inc., the Project area has been used for agriculture and there have been no buildings on the property since at least 1939, and the landowner has no records or knowledge of excavation activities at the property. The Project does not include any federal or tribal lands.

Stag Moose is not proposing environmental mitigation action related to the Bjorn Solar Project as no adverse environmental impacts are anticipated. The Project has been sited on private property leased by the Applicant to avoid floodplains, wetlands, and streams as well as to minimize the need for clearing and grading. The Applicant considered potential alternative sites that allowed for connection to the existing distribution system in the area of the nearby substation, but there were no suitable alternative sites with environmental effects as low as the proposed location. Further, construction of the Project site would minimize earth disturbance to the extent possible, and promptly upon cessation of construction a native seed mix would be planted throughout. Professional vegetation maintenance crews would manage vegetation actively throughout the project life to ensure the desired native pollinator plant species thrive and invasive species are promptly eliminated and do not spread. The addition of permanent cover and native grasses and flowers to the Project area would result in increased water infiltration and reduced runoff during rain events and is expected to benefit the local ecosystem through the introduction of native species within a formerly strictly agricultural setting.

E. PUBLIC AND AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

A local newspaper advertisement announcing the availability of the EA and participation under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act was published on September 18 and 25, 2024 in the Barron News Shield (Barron, WI). A copy of the EA was available for public review at <https://www.rd.usda.gov/resources/environmental-studies/assessment/bjorn-solar>. The 14-day comment period ended on October 2, 2024. RUS received no comments.

F. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on its EA, RUS has concluded that the proposed Project will have no significant effects to land use, important farmland, formally classified lands, floodplains, wetlands, water resources, coastal resources, biological resources, cultural resources and historic properties, aesthetics, air quality, socioeconomics and environmental justice, noise, transportation, human health and safety, or corridors. The proposed Project will have no effects on historic properties listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and no effects to federally listed species or designated critical habitat. The proposed Project will not disproportionately affect minority or low-income populations.

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, as amended, the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations, and RD's Environmental Policies and Procedures, RUS has determined that the environmental impacts of the proposed Project have been adequately addressed and that no significant impacts to the quality of the human environment will result from construction and operation of the proposed Project. Any final action by RUS related to the proposed Project will be subject to, and contingent upon,

compliance with all relevant federal and state environmental laws and regulations. Because RUS's action will not result in significant impacts to the quality of the human environment, RUS will not prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for its potential federal action associated with the proposed Project.

G. RUS LOAN REVIEW AND RIGHT OF ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW

This FONSI is not a decision on a loan application and therefore not an approval of the expenditure of federal funds. Issuance of the FONSI and its notices concludes RUS's environmental review process. The ultimate decision on loan approval depends upon conclusion of this environmental review process in addition to financial and engineering reviews. Issuance of the FONSI and publication of notices will allow for these reviews to proceed. The decision to provide financial assistance also is subject to the availability of loan funds for the designated purpose in RUS's budget. There are no provisions to appeal this FONSI or the agency's other environmental determinations. Legal challenges to the FONSI may be filed in Federal District Court under the Administrative Procedures Act.

H. APPROVAL

This Finding of No Significant Impact is effective upon signature.
Dated: October 4, 2024

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For additional information on this FONSI and EA, please contact RUS.EHPD.IRA@usda.gov.