



Public Service Commission of Wisconsin

Rebecca Cameron Valcq, Chairperson
Ellen Nowak, Commissioner
Tyler Huebner, Commissioner

4822 Madison Yards Way
P.O. Box 7854
Madison, WI 53707-7854

August 6, 2020

Re: Application for Certificate of Public Convenience and
Necessity of Wood County Solar Project, LLC to Construct
a Solar Electric Generation Facility in the Town of
Saratoga, Wood County, Wisconsin

9803-CE-100

To the Person Addressed:

The Public Service Commission of Wisconsin (Commission) received an application from Wood County Solar Project, LLC (Wood County or applicant) for the construction of a new solar electric generation facility and associated facilities. The Commission also received an application from Wood County to construct an electric tie line to connect the solar facility to the existing transmission grid. The project would be located in the town of Saratoga in Wood County, WI. The Commission is sending this letter to property owners near the proposed solar facility site or directly along the proposed routes of the tie line as well as individuals who have asked to be placed on our mailing list. It is also being sent to public officials who may wish to place this notification in a location where it can be viewed by the public.

The solar electric generation facility is a Type III action under Wis. Admin. Code § PSC 4.10(3). Type III actions normally do not require preparation of an environmental assessment (EA) or an environmental impact statement (EIS) under Wis. Admin. Code § PSC 4.10(3). However, an evaluation of a specific Type III proposal may indicate that the preparation of an EA is warranted for that proposal. Commission staff from the Division of Digital Access, Consumer and Environmental Affairs completed an environmental review of the proposed project and prepared an EA to determine if an EIS is necessary. A notification of the Commission's intent to prepare an EA, including a solicitation for comments on the environmental aspects of this project, was mailed to landowners, local and regional media, affected municipal entities, the regional planning commission, and area legislators in the project area on April 22, 2020.

The preliminary determination indicates that no significant impacts on the human or natural environment are likely to occur as a result of the construction and operation of this project. Therefore, preparation of an EIS is not required. Comments regarding this determination can be directed to the contact person listed at the end of this letter. The remainder of this letter describes the primary impacts of the project and summarizes the conclusions of the EA. To obtain a copy of the EA, please request a copy from the contact person listed at the end of this letter.

Proposed Project

The applicant proposes construction of a 150 megawatts solar generation facility. The major components of the project would include the photovoltaic (PV) solar panels, power conversion units, inverters, collection lines, a collector substation, an operation and maintenance building, and perimeter fences. The solar generation facility would interconnect to a new 138 kilovolt (kV) project collector substation using an underground collection system. The proposed 138 kV generation tie line would carry the electricity to interconnect to the existing electric grid.

The total project study area is 1,882 acres. This total includes approximately 1,208 acres for the proposed solar arrays, plus an additional 674 acres of alternative solar array placement areas. Alternative solar array areas would only be used in place of proposed array areas if parts of the proposed areas are deemed inadequate. The project would be constructed exclusively on land owned by Golden Sands LLC and Full Circle Farmland LLC.

The project area consists of an active red pine plantation within a predominately wooded rural landscape of natural dry-mesic to dry mixed coniferous-deciduous woodland. Upland grassland communities exist in areas where the cleared plantation has revegetated. Sevenmile Creek and its adjacent wetlands would be in the far northwest corner of the project area. The surface topography of the project area is relatively flat. The northwest corner of the project area has steep slopes down to Sevenmile Creek.

The purpose of the proposed project is to generate utility-scale solar power for sale. The applicant anticipates that Wisconsin utilities will own the solar generation project, since many utilities have publically expressed the need for solar power and have plans to decommission fossil fuel power plants. On May, 29, 2020, Wisconsin Power and Light Company submitted an application for a Certificate of Authority to acquire, own, and operate the proposed project.¹

Potential Natural Resources and Social Impacts

Most of the project impacts during construction would be temporary, such as increased traffic, noise, and air pollution. After construction, the project would have relatively minor impacts to the surrounding environment. However, the project would permanently affect the current land use and aesthetics of the area, as well as several animal and plant species.

During construction activities, there would be increased noise, dust and vibration in the construction areas. There would be increased traffic in the project area as employees and deliveries arrive at and leave the project work areas. Loose or disturbed soils could be susceptible to erosion. The applicant provided a vegetation management plan that would address erosion and storm water risks, as well as provide information on restoration activities.

¹ WPL's Application for Certificate of Authority & Affiliated Interest Approvals - PSC REF#: 390310

The applicant completed a noise study to measure the current sound levels around the project area and estimated the impact of the proposed solar generation facility using the technical specifications of planned electric generation equipment. The results found that the facility would not increase noise in the area. However, due to the relatively new nature of solar generation projects in Wisconsin, Commission staff recommend that the applicant be required to conduct a noise study post-construction of the solar generation facility to evaluate the actual impact to noise in the area.

Animals and plants would be displaced or damaged as a result of the project. The applicant completed a certified endangered resources (ER) review with Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) for the proposed project area. The ER review identified measures that the applicant would be required to perform to mitigate impacts to protected species. Since the project would begin construction over a year from the ER review date, Commission staff will recommend that the applicant be required to conduct an updated review closer to the construction start date to determine if any additional actions should be required to avoid impacts to protected species. Commission staff will also suggest that the applicant be required to implement WDNR's recommended actions to protect a special concern reptile species and two special concern butterfly species that may have suitable habitat in the project area.

Impacts to developed land surrounding the solar generation facility, such as residences and commercial properties, are likely to be minor. Some studies found that the solar panels could create a heat island effect, but planned setback distances would remove any potential impacts to the surrounding area. No studies are known that show solar generation facilities negatively affect nearby property values. The applicant plans to leave in place existing trees within 50 feet of the facility's property line to help block the view of the facility from nearby residences. The applicant also has implemented setback distance of 100 feet from surrounding properties. Additionally, the nearest residence would be roughly 375 feet from the facility's property line. These actions, combined with the generally forested landscape of the project area, should decrease most visual impacts to nearby residences.

Conclusion

The project as proposed in the application and subsequent filings, including use of the stated construction methods and implementation of the mitigation plans, is not expected to cause any significant environmental effects. No significant impacts on the human environment that would warrant the preparation of an EIS are expected if this project were constructed using some combination of the currently proposed array sites. Thus, preparation of an EIS, as described in Wis. Stat. § 1.11, is not required for this project.

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Copies of the EA are available upon request, either in electronic or paper format (for a paper copy, an address must be provided). Requests for a copy of the EA should be made to Adam Ingwell at the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin by telephone at (608) 267-9197, by e-mail at adam.ingwell@wisconsin.gov, or by regular mail directed to the Public Service Commission, P.O. Box 7854, Madison, Wisconsin 53707-7854.

Comments on the finding of no significant impact for this proposed project should be made to Adam Ingwell at the address above, by email, or through the Commission's web comment form. Go to the Commission's web site at <http://psc.wi.gov>, click on "File a Comment" button. On the next page, select the "File a comment" link that appears for docket number 9803-CE-100.

All comments must be received by Friday, August 21, 2020.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam Ingwell", written in a cursive style.

Adam Ingwell
Environmental Affairs Coordinator – Supervisor
Division of Digital Access, Consumer and Environmental Affairs

AI:kle DL:01758186

Attachment

Wood County Solar Project 9803-CE-100/101

