

Controversial wind farm in Lesotho gets the go-ahead

Title

The controversial wind farm proposed for Lesotho's Maluti-Drakensberg has received the go-ahead from the Lesotho Government. Conservationists are concerned that this decision does not bode well for the future of vultures in the region or for the reputation of the fledging wind energy industry in southern Africa.

“Approval of the Letseng project is a source of great concern to BirdLife”, said Ken Mwathe, BirdLife International's Africa Policy Programme Coordinator. “African governments must tread carefully on renewable energy projects by ensuring they do not threaten birds and biodiversity”.

PowerNET Developments (Pty) Ltd applied for permission to erect 42 wind turbines in north-eastern Lesotho. This site falls within the breeding, roosting and foraging grounds of important populations of both **Bearded** and **Cape Vulture**. It is well known from international studies that vultures are prone to colliding with wind turbines and BirdLife South Africa is concerned that this wind farm development could have severe impacts on these two threatened vultures.



Cape Vulture, which is only found in southern Africa, is currently listed as Vulnerable. The Lesotho Highlands are of global significance for Cape Vulture as the area is used for breeding, roosting and foraging.

The Environmental Impact Statement, indicated the anticipated impacts of the project on highly unique and sensitive birds will be of high to very high negative significance, rendering

the project unsustainable.

In response to these concerns, the developer has proposed mitigation measures, including the use of radar linked to a system that would automatically shut turbines down when birds are at risk of colliding.

“The problem is that at this stage we simply do not have enough information to be sure that these mitigation measures will be effective in substantially reducing the risk to the vultures”, said Samantha Ralston, Birds and Renewable Energy Manager at BirdLife South Africa. It is also not clear if the project would be feasible should these measures be implemented as wind turbines do not generate electricity when they are not turning.

In order to determine if mitigation will be effective and feasible, more research is needed to understand how often, at what height and under what conditions the birds move through the site. The Department of Environment in Lesotho recognised this and issued the environmental clearance for an initial period of one year in order to assess the bird mortality risks associated with the project. The Department also reserves the right to revoke the authorisation if there are environmental concerns caused by the project that are beyond mitigation.

“We are really pleased that the Director of Environment, Mr Damane, recognises that this project potentially poses a severe risk to vultures and we understand that the decision was an attempt to find a compromise between the needs of the developer and the concerns of conservationists”, said Ms Ralston.

BirdLife South Africa is however concerned that the decision of the Lesotho Government to issue the environmental clearance is procedurally flawed and is not in line with the internationally-recognised precautionary principle (which prescribes a risk-averse and cautious approach to environmental impacts).

“The additional studies required by the Record of Decision should have been completed prior to the approval as this information should have informed the decision”, she said. There is also no assurance that stakeholders will continue to have the opportunity to provide input on the additional reports or seek recourse should they be dissatisfied with the outcome. BirdLife South Africa and its conservation partners have therefore requested the decision to be reviewed.



“We are extremely concerned that the

project could have severe impacts on both Cape Vultures and Bearded Vultures” said Dr Tim Stowe Director of International Operations at the RSPB, BirdLife’s Partner in the UK.

“These magnificent birds are one of the key reasons that the Maloti-Drakensberg Park has

been identified as a transboundary World Heritage Site – an area of global importance for which both Lesotho and South Africa have responsibility”. While the proposed wind farm does not fall within the Maloti-Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site, vultures move great distances, transcending geographical boundaries to forage and conservationists are concerned that the wind farm will pose a threat to the overall vulture population in the region.

BirdLife South Africa recognises the importance of clean energy generation, particularly in light of global climate change, and supports the responsible development of wind energy. Impacts on birds can be minimised or even avoided with careful planning and assessment. One of the most effective ways of reducing the impacts is the considered location of both the wind farm and its turbines. Unfortunately much of Lesotho is not ideally located for wind farms given the importance of the Maloti-Drakensberg area for vultures.

“This makes it all the more important to set a precedent for rigorous assessment of wind energy in Lesotho”, said Mark D. Anderson, CEO of BirdLife South Africa. “Poorly planned wind farms give wind energy a bad name. That is not good for nature or for our efforts to combat climate change.”

BirdLife South Africa does not believe that we need to choose between renewable energy and birds. By working with wind energy developers, environmental consultants, and government and bird specialists, BirdLife South Africa’s aim is to ensure that renewable energy is developed in a way that is truly sustainable.