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Commentary for Forum

Audubon Reacts to Solar Project

On April 14th, Yolo Audubon Society sent a letter to the Davis City Council, expressing our dismay at the plans to convert the 235 acres of land, including former ponds, by the Davis Wastewater Treatment Facility into a commercial solar development. Mayor Brett Lee and City Council Member Dan Carson mentioned our letter (April 26th, Davis Enterprise) response to widespread community criticism of the Council's rushed decision and lack of due process to move the project forward, but they left out some fairly important points that were made in our letter. We believe it is important that they be reiterated here.

The National Audubon Society is, in general, supportive of alternative energy sources; however, it is misleading to suggest that this is an across-the-board approval. The fact is that birds are killed both by windmills and by solar arrays. A commonly accepted fact is that giant windmills kill birds, but less well known is that solar facilities can also be deadly. From a distance, at a certain angle, the panels resemble a body of water, attracting birds. Once arriving, birds may crash directly into the panels. This has been documented at facilities that use mirrors as well as photovoltaic panels. What few studies have been done (and made publicly available) have revealed an average kill of one bird/acre/year. For the Davis agreement with BrightNight, that would mean hundreds of birds killed per year.

We would urge the City of Davis, and BrightNight Solar, to implement the following:

1. Develop and implement a robust monitoring plan to document avian mortality at the site, including a fact-based estimate of birds killed but scavenged prior to discovery of carcass.
2. Commit to mitigating bird death at the facility, either through measures taken on-site or through contributing to bird habitat or restoration elsewhere in Yolo County. Excess mortality should be defined and a plan developed to reduce that mortality either through onsite measures or through constructive mitigations elsewhere in the county. One off-site mitigation might be to include the nearby pond at the site of the Yolo County Landfill, which continues to be an important refuge for birds, especially in winter and during migration.

One of the biggest immediate challenges facing birds is habitat loss, and paving over habitat is a non-recoverable harm. Solar arrays can be located above parking lots or other built-up areas, which should always be considered before choosing to site them on open land. The

settling ponds at the Wastewater Treatment Plant have supported thousands of birds, mostly waterfowl and migrating shorebirds, for over 50 years. While the loss of this habitat is not due to the decision to construct a solar facility on that land, the loss of such significant habitat should inform our actions related to new uses of the property. It behooves local, state, and federal government agencies to make sure the solar industry follows the law, employs best practices with regard to the siting of installations, and provides mitigation where installations sacrifice wildlife habitat (and, indeed, wildlife).

We have been offered an opportunity after the fact to meet with BrightNight. We look forward to that conversation and will keep the Davis community apprised of its outcome. We also understand that the agreement includes a provision for PVEL, a partner with BrightNight in this project, to develop materials and programs for local schools, and we would be happy to be a resource to contribute to that effort.

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For the Yolo Audubon Society Board of Directors