

MEDIA RELEASE

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Controversial wind farm in Lesotho gets the go-ahead

Johannesburg, 28 January 2014:

The controversial wind farm proposed for Lesotho's Maluti-Drakensberg received the go-ahead from the Lesotho Government in October 2013. 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 (each with a capacity of 850 kW) near Letšeng-La-Terae in north-eastern Lesotho. This site falls within the breeding, roosting and foraging grounds of important populations of both the Bearded Vulture and the Cape Vulture. It is well known from international studies that vultures are prone to colliding with wind turbines and BirdLife South Africa is therefore concerned that this wind farm development could have severe impacts on these two threatened vultures.

Bearded Vultures are currently listed as *Endangered* in South Africa but, as their population has been declining, it will be uplisted to *Critically Endangered* in the pending update of *The Eskom Red Data Book of birds of South Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland*.

The Cape Vulture, which is only found in southern Africa, is currently listed as *Vulnerable* in the Red Data Book. It will be listed as *Endangered* in the updated Red Data Book. The southern node of the Cape Vulture population is centred on the Drakensberg Mountains and comprises 44% of the South African and Lesotho population, and 41% of the global population (which includes the colonies in Botswana). The Lesotho Highlands is of global significance for the Cape Vulture as the area is used for breeding, roosting and foraging.

The specialist report, compiled by well-respected ornithologist Dr Andrew Jenkins as part of 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” he added, and “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.

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Notes to Editors:

- The *Endangered* Bearded Vulture occurs in two isolated populations in Sub-Saharan Africa, one in the Ethiopian Highlands and the other in South Africa and Lesotho (primarily in the Lesotho Highlands and the surrounding escarpment of South Africa). The population of Bearded Vultures in southern Africa is small and declining. There are only approximately 100 breeding pairs, and approximately 60% of the population occurs in Lesotho.
- Cape Vultures are endemic to southern Africa (i.e. they are found nowhere else in the world). The Lesotho Highlands are a critical part of their range. Cape Vultures nest on cliffs, with the largest colonies numbering more than 500 pairs.
- Vultures appear to be particularly prone to colliding with the turbine blades and high collision rates have been observed in Griffon Vultures at wind farms in Europe, most notably in Spain
- Both Cape and Bearded Vultures have large foraging ranges and are likely to pass through the proposed Letseng wind farm site on a regular basis, resulting in a high risk of collisions.
- Using population models, KZN-based scientists Sonja Kruger and Ian Rushworth have demonstrated that even a small increase in adult mortality could cause the rapid decline and even local extinction of these long-lived, slow-breeding birds.
- South Africa and Lesotho share the responsibility of safeguarding the populations of Bearded Vultures and Cape Vultures in the Lesotho Highlands and the surrounding escarpment of South Africa. Birds do not observe political boundaries and the populations of both species span South Africa and Lesotho. Significant impacts on the birds in one country will spill over to its neighbour. BirdLife South Africa therefore believes that it has a responsibility to respond to the threat that the proposed Letseng Wind Farm poses to the Lesotho-Drakensberg populations of Bearded Vultures and Cape Vultures as further declines of birds in Lesotho will severely impact the viability and survival rates of the vultures in South Africa.
- Vultures play an important ecological, economic and cultural role. They are scavengers and by disposing of waste and carcasses they help control populations of other disease-carrying scavengers and pests. In this way they help protect human health, as well as that of domesticated animals and wildlife.
- Birds, especially vultures, are highly mobile. They do not observe political boundaries. The populations of Bearded Vultures and Cape Vultures in the Lesotho Highlands and the surrounding escarpment of South Africa are the shared responsibility of South Africa and Lesotho.
- South Africa and Lesotho are both signatories to the Memorandum of Understanding concerning the Conservation of Migratory Birds of Prey in Africa and Eurasia (Raptors) and hence these countries should adopt measures that will promote the survival of raptors within their range.
- The precautionary principle, as outlined in Principle 15 of the Rio Declaration states the following: "In order to protect the environment, the approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation".



Map 1: Location of the Letseng Wind Farm



Map 2: The proximity of the proposed wind farm to Important Bird Areas and the Maloti-Drakensberg Park World Heritage Site.

About BirdLife South Africa, BirdLife International and the RSPB

- BirdLife International is a global Network of 120 NGOs in 118 countries that protects environments where birds are found by working with people and governments for sustainable development.
- BirdLife International supports the transition to renewable sources of energy, but this transition must avoid harm to ecosystems and biodiversity. BirdLife International recommends that all energy developments should take place utilising a positive planning framework and must be subject to strategic planning including assessments of their environmental impacts on habitats, biodiversity and local communities. A precautionary avoidance of harm to biodiversity is essential when designing and siting renewable energy developments and technologies. Further information can be found at: <http://www.birdlife.org/worldwide/policy/renewable-energy-and-safeguard-policies>

- BirdLife South Africa's vision is to promote the conservation, research, understanding, observation of and enjoyment of natural birds, and their habitats.
- BirdLife South Africa supports renewable energy production, however renewable energy facilities can have unintended negative impacts on avifauna. BirdLife South Africa, together with its partners, has therefore developed tools to help predict and minimise potential impacts on birds. Further information on these resources can be found at www.birdlife.org.za/conservation/birds-and-wind-energy.
- BirdLife South Africa works with government and industry to minimise the impact of renewable energy developments on birds and their habitats.
- BirdLife South Africa is the largest non-profit bird conservation organization in the country. It relies on donor funding and financial support from the public to carry out its critical conservation work.
- For more information, visit www.birdlife.org.za.
- The RSPB is the largest nature conservation organisation in Europe with over one million members in the UK. The RSPB is part of BirdLife International and work in support of a number of BirdLife partners, including BirdLife South Africa with whom they have had a strong association for many years. The RSPB has extensive experience dealing with the potential impacts of developments such as wind farms and provides advice to BirdLife South Africa on these issues. For more information on RSPB visit www.rspb.org.uk.