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Immediate release

**CALL FOR APPROPRIATE SPATIAL PLANNING AND RIGOROUS IMPACT ASSESSMENT TO MINIMISE THE RISK WIND FARMS POSE TO CAPE VULTURES**

**Summary:**

The Cape Vulture *Gyps coprotheres* is endemic to southern Africa and is globally Endangered. Data from wind energy facilities in other countries (e.g. Spain) indicate that vultures are one of the most collision-prone groups of birds where their ranges overlap with wind energy developments. While VulPro, BirdLife South Africa and the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT) support the responsible development of renewable energy in South Africa, we are concerned about the pending wind farm applications in the Eastern Cape. The intention to promote large-scale wind energy development in parts of the Eastern Cape, through the Renewable Energy Development Zones (REDZ) identified in the Strategic Environmental Impact Assessment for Wind and Solar Energy, is of particular concern. Both the proposed Cookhouse and Stormberg REDZ include large areas where wind energy developments are likely to negatively affect vultures. To reduce the risk that wind energy poses to vultures, it is essential to carefully consider the placement of such sites. Ideally, wind turbines should be located well away from areas regularly used by vultures (e.g. within 50 km of, roost and breeding sites). We therefore urge that the delineation of these zones is reconsidered. In addition, we encourage more rigorous impact assessment and monitoring in areas where wind farms are proposed in areas where they may present a risk to vultures or other species of concern.

The Cape Vulture no longer breeds in Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Namibia, leaving South Africa and Botswana as the stronghold for the species. With only ~4,000 breeding pairs left, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) uplisted the species from Vulnerable to Endangered in 2015.

These birds rely on habitats such as escarpments and cliff faces for breeding, and open plains where they scavenge. Cape Vultures are considered to be slow to mature, as females only lay one egg per year from the age of five years. Like other vultures, they scavenge on dead animals and, by removing carcasses from the landscape, perform a vital role in the food chain and in maintaining ecosystem health by preventing the spread of harmful diseases, such as rabies. As agriculture and developments have expanded over recent years, both within communal and commercial areas, the availability of food supply has become limited, which has resulted in increased pressure on the species.

**The potential impact of wind energy on vultures.** Cape Vultures are large birds with a wingspan of about 2.6 m and weigh between 9 and 11 kg. As a result, they are not agile flyers and cannot rapidly

adjust their flight path in response to potential hazards such as moving turbine blades. They also have a small frontal binocular field that creates large blind spot areas and they may not see obstacles in their direction of travel. This results in a higher risk of collision with wind turbines and associated infrastructure.

Wind energy is relatively new in southern Africa and there are therefore limited data on the impacts of wind energy on Cape Vultures. However, studies from wind farms in other regions have recorded numerous fatalities of other Old World vultures such as the Egyptian Vulture, Eurasian Griffon Vulture, Rüppell's Griffon, Cinereous Vulture and White-Backed Vulture. This raises concerns that wind energy can potentially have a significant negative impact on Cape Vultures in South Africa.

Wind farm developments also go hand-in-hand with associated infrastructure including electrical networks, met masts, roads, and so on. Cape Vultures are highly susceptible to electrocutions and collision with power lines, and the addition of associated infrastructure will increase the risk of such collisions and electrocutions around wind farms. Since 1996, at least 1031 Cape Vulture mortalities have been recorded on electrical infrastructure across South Africa by the Eskom/EWT Partnership.

Renewable Energy Development Zones (REDZ) are purportedly “areas where large scale wind and solar PV energy facilities can be developed in a manner that limits significant negative impacts on the environment, while yielding the highest possible socio-economic benefits to the country,”(CSIR, 2016). However, both the proposed Stormberg and Cookhouse REDZ zones are in escarpment areas, used by Cape Vultures for foraging, roosting and breeding. These zones include a number of Cape Vulture roosts and colonies within their boundaries, and vultures fitted with tracking devices by VulPro have confirmed that they use these zones extensively.

VulPro, BirdLife South Africa and the EWT believe that the development of wind energy in the Stormberg and Cookhouse REDZ zones should be reconsidered. **The proposed location of wind energy facilities is key to minimising impacts – developments near vulture roosts and breeding colonies should not be encouraged.** It is widely accepted that the best way to prevent collisions with wind turbines is to place new developments in areas where potential risks to birds are low. Unfortunately, current and proposed wind energy development sites and Cape Vulture habitats often overlap. Cape Vultures rely heavily on thermals for flight and escarpments, which create natural thermals, are their preferred habitat. These habitats are also the most viable sites for many wind farm developments in the Eastern Cape. It is therefore of concern that that a high number of proposed and approved wind farm developments encroach on areas where endemic Cape Vultures roost, breed and forage.

We also recommend that a precautionary approach must be taken with regards to proposed wind farms within the range of Cape Vultures. Developers and decision makers are encouraged to consult with vulture specialists to ensure that the most up-to-date information is considered, and that impacts are adequately identified and addressed. The development of wind farms within 50 km, of vulture roosts and colonies is strongly discouraged (this is the typical foraging range of Cape Vultures). In the absence of rigorous bird monitoring data confirming otherwise (i.e. beyond the minimum outlined in the BirdLife South Africa/EWT *Best Practice guidelines for assessing and monitoring the impact of wind energy facilities on birds in Southern Africa*, Jenkins et al. 2015), , the risk of Cape Vulture collisions should be assumed to be high to very high within these buffers.

We further recommend that projects that have already received environmental authorisation without rigorous pre-construction avifaunal monitoring should be subjected to careful scrutiny; turbine layouts should be informed by avifaunal monitoring data, and environmental management plans should include provision for operational-phase monitoring and mitigation (including shut-down on demand), in the event that collisions do occur.

### **Who we are**

VulPro, BirdLife South Africa and the EWT are working to protect our declining vulture populations across southern Africa.

VulPro is a multifaceted organisation dedicated to the preservation of vultures not only in South Africa but throughout the species' foraging range which encompasses southern Africa and further afield. Our on the ground multi-layered approach (vulture rehabilitation, captive breeding for supplementation and reintroduction, research, breeding monitoring and surveys, education, training, tracking and tagging, etc.) has enabled us to be leaders in vulture conservation programmes for advancing knowledge, awareness and innovation in the conservation of African vulture populations for the benefit and well-being of society at large.

BirdLife South Africa is the country partner of BirdLife International, a global partnership of conservation organisations that strives to conserve birds, their habitats and global biodiversity, by working with people towards sustainability in the use of natural resources. BirdLife International partners operate in more than 100 countries and territories worldwide. BirdLife South Africa works with government, scientists and industry help ensure that impacts of renewable energy on birds are understood and minimised.

The Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), a conservation-leader for over 40 years, is committed to preserving the connection between humans, wildlife and habitats. The EWT is active throughout southern Africa, working tirelessly to conserve a variety of wildlife, as well as the habitats they live in. The EWT entered into a strategic partnership with Eskom in 1996 to address issues pertaining to wildlife and energy infrastructure systematically and at a national scale. The Wildlife and Energy Programme oversees this partnership, and is also making strides into understanding the impacts of renewable energy technology on wildlife by engaging stakeholders and working on the ground to assess the problems first hand.

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