



MEDIA RELEASE

For immediate use

Wind farm in Lesotho could cause the local extinction of vultures

Johannesburg, 24 January 2013: BirdLife South Africa and BirdLife International are very concerned that the proposed development of a wind farm at Letseng in Lesotho could have severe impacts on the already declining populations of Cape Vultures and Bearded Vultures. 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.

PowerNET Developments (Pty) Ltd propose to erect 42 wind turbines (each with a capacity of 850 kW) near Letšeng-La-Terae, on the north-eastern escarpment of the Drakensberg. The environmental impact assessment (EIA) for the proposed Letseng Wind Farm is in its final stages of completion. The avifaunal specialist report, compiled by well-respected ornithologist Dr Andrew Jenkins, indicates that even with mitigation, the anticipated impacts of the project on highly unique and sensitive avifauna will be of high to very high negative significance, rendering the project unsustainable.

While wind energy is fairly new to southern Africa, poorly located wind turbines elsewhere in the world have had significant impacts on bird populations. Impacts include loss of habitat, disturbance and mortality through collisions with the turbine blades. In Smøla, Norway, for example, a poorly sited wind farm caused the number of White-tailed Eagles (also known as Sea Eagles) within the site development and a 500m buffer around it to decline from 13 pairs to five.

Such devastating impacts have not occurred at all wind farms. “The considered location of wind farms is the key to ensuring that impacts on birds are kept to a minimum” says Samantha Ralston, Birds and Renewable Energy Manager for BirdLife South Africa. Among other things, turbines should be kept well away from areas frequently used by collision-prone birds such as large-bodied raptors.

Vultures play an important ecological, economic, cultural and aesthetic 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.

Unfortunately, vultures appear to be particularly prone to colliding with the turbine blades. High collision rates have been observed in Griffon Vultures at wind farms in Europe, most notably in Tarifa, Spain. The Griffon Vulture is a close relative of the Cape Vulture. A recent study in Tarifa, Spain, estimated that 0.22 vulture deaths occurred per turbine per year. This was

reduced by approximately half with the introduction of mitigation, but even with mitigation one can expect that for every 10 turbines at least one vulture will be killed every year.

The proposed Letseng wind farm is located in habitat that is critical for both the Bearded Vulture and Cape Vulture, both threatened species. The Bearded Vulture is listed as regionally *Endangered* and the Cape Vulture as *Vulnerable* in South Africa. Birds do not observe political boundaries and the populations of both species span South Africa and Lesotho. A further decline of birds in Lesotho, will severely impact the viability and survival rates of the vultures in South Africa. Using population models, scientists 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. “BirdLife South Africa has learnt from its partners in Europe and North America that incorrectly located wind farms can cause massive mortalities of vultures and eagles”, says Mark Anderson, CEO of BirdLife South Africa. “For this reason, we will strongly oppose any wind farm developments which we believe will result in significant impacts on the Bearded Vulture, Cape Vulture and other threatened South African birds” he added.

BirdLife South Africa fully recognises the need to move towards generating clean energy and supports the responsible development of a renewable energy infrastructure in southern Africa. BirdLife South Africa therefore encourages wind farm developers to work with them to help identify suitable sites for wind energy to minimise the impact on birds and the environment while delivering lasting sustainable development. For example, prior to siting a wind farm, a Strategic Environmental Assessment should be undertaken as this enables avoidance of areas that are known to be environmentally sensitive.

Dr Julius Arinaitwe, BirdLife International’s Regional Director for Africa says development is vital, but must progress in an environmentally sensitive manner. “Development is underpinned by healthy ecosystems and the biodiversity therein. The choices we make now must not negatively affect Africa’s ability to develop in future” he said.

BirdLife South Africa and BirdLife International are calling on PowerNET Developments (Pty) Ltd to voluntarily withdraw the EIA application. BirdLife South Africa is also encouraging the public and partners to comment on the EIA report. Further information can be obtained from Samantha Ralston (at energy@birdlife.org.za or 083-6733948).

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For further information, please contact:

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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 is small and declining rapidly; the last population estimate in 1992 put the population at just over 200 breeding pairs and it has decreased significantly since then. 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). Their population is decreasing as result of habitat loss, reduction in food (carrion) availability, collisions with powerlines and use in traditional medicine. The Lesotho Highlands are a critical part of their range and supports at least 12% of the global population. Cape Vultures nest on cliffs, with the largest colonies numbering more than 500 pairs.
- Both species 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.

- 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. 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.
- 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.

About BirdLife South Africa and BirdLife International

- BirdLife International is a global Network of NGOs in 117 countries that protects environments where birds are found by working with people and governments for sustainable development.
- 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.