



## **MEDIA RELEASE**

**For immediate use**

### **No wind farm for Eastern Cape's wilderness area**

Johannesburg, 10 March 2021 – Conservation NGO, BirdLife South Africa, has welcomed a decision by the Department of Environment Forestry and Fisheries (DEFF) to refuse environmental authorisation for the controversial Inyanda Roodeplaats Wind Farm in the Eastern Cape.

“Environmentalists normally embrace renewable energy, but some places are just not well-suited for wind energy infrastructure”, noted Dr Hanneline Smit-Robinson, BirdLife South Africa’s Head of Conservation.

The wind farm had been proposed within the Groot Winterhoekberg in the Eastern Cape, located in an almost pristine environment, surrounded by protected areas. The application process for this wind farm development has had a controversial history, including allegations that eagle nests had been burned and that eagles were shot in an attempt to sway the environmental impact assessment.

To stakeholders’ surprise, the proposal to develop 52 wind turbines and associated infrastructure within this sensitive location was granted environmental authorisation in April 2018. Experts, including other government departments, had questioned if a wind farm was compatible with the surrounding land use. The site lies within a National Protected Areas Expansion Strategy Area – between portions of Groendal Nature Reserve and close to the Baviaanskloof World Heritage Site.

Adding to the confusion, DEFF had called for a peer review of the Environmental Impact Assessment, yet it issued the environmental authorisation before this peer review was concluded. BirdLife South Africa and four other stakeholders appealed the decision to issue environmental authorisation. In response to these appeals, in April 2019, Acting Minister at the time, Ms L. Zulu, set the decision aside and remitted the application back to DEFF for further consultation and reconsideration.

BirdLife South Africa was concerned that many of the proposed turbines would have been located on a narrow ridge top and spur, directly in the flight path of birds of prey. Some of the species that the wind turbines could have killed are already at risk of extinction in southern Africa, including the Martial Eagle, Black Harrier and Verreaux’s Eagle (previously known as Black Eagle). The sites’ topography limited options to move the turbines away from high-risk areas.

“The Department’s decision to ultimately refuse environmental authorisation for this project is important. It supports our view that some environments are just too sensitive to risk relying on wind farm operators implementing measures throughout the facility’s lifespan to reduce the risk to our country’s biodiversity.

Operational phase mitigation, such as stopping turbines operating during high-risk periods, can be costly, it requires compliance and enforcement oversight and, even with the best intentions, it is unlikely to be 100% effective”, notes Samantha Ralston-Paton, BirdLife South Africa’s Birds and Renewable Energy Project Manager.

DEFF’s decision also highlights the importance of considering the need and desirability of proposed developments. The annexure outlining the reasons for DEFF’s refusal notes that numerous other proposed wind energy projects have received environmental authorisation and will have substantially lesser environmental impacts.

It is a bitter-sweet celebration for BirdLife South Africa. “Renewable energy, including wind energy, is important to mitigate the impacts of global climate change, but the transition must be just, and it must be green. It cannot come at the expense of nature”, reflects Smit-Robinson.

“DEFF rarely refuses environmental authorisation, and BirdLife South Africa rarely appeals decisions to approve proposed wind energy infrastructure. This is because most reputable developers abandon those really sensitive sites once they become aware of the risks. We prefer to work proactively with industry to find solutions that allow us to protect nature and mitigate climate change at the same time” Ralston-Paton concludes.

**End**

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**Notes for the editor:**

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 115 countries and territories worldwide. BirdLife South Africa works with government, scientists and industry help ensure that the impacts of renewable energy on birds are understood and minimised.

BirdLife South Africa relies on donor funding and financial support from the public to carry out its critical conservation work. Investec Corporate and Institutional Banking (a division of Investec Bank Limited) sponsor BirdLife South Africa’s Birds and Renewable Energy Project.

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