SITING + PERMITTING

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Ground Game: Overcoming Permitting Risks Through Stakeholder Engagement & Collaboration

BACKGROUND

This presentation delves into the case of a North Dakota wind project, which secured permit approval within a remarkable seven months while overcoming a potential project-threatening issue.

A 2021 North Dakota Game and Fish wind siting guideline document requiring a two-mile distance between wind turbines and sharp-tailed grouse lek sites posed a serious threat to the project

OBJECTIVE

The team objective was to work collaboratively with the state agency and carve out a path forward to ensure confidence in the permit approval process.

METHODS

Methods used to achieve these objectives;

- Examination of agency consultation notes
- Analysis of past state permit siting applications
- Collaboration with environmental consultants and legal experts
- Monthly meetings with state agencies

RESULTS

The North Dakota Public Service Commission State Siting Process is designed to further the state policy of siting energy conversion projects and associated transmission facilities in an orderly manner compatible with environmental preservation and the efficient use of resources.

Proactive engagement with the state agencies resulted in a proposal that incorporated additional data and scientific insights, aligning more closely with agency expectations. Additional fieldwork was conducted to assess the importance of the grassland habitat that currently exists at the project site. The current data was analyzed against the state agency data to determine areas of ecological importance and areas where the habitat was broken up and fragmented which demonstrated a lower quality habitat for the sharp-tailed grouse species. This extra level of engagement resulted in favorable conversations with North Dakota Game and Fish against the 2021 wind siting guideline document.

The two-plus years of consultation and survey work were integrated into the North Dakota State permit. It was important to show that we understood the concerns the agencies had and how to bolster our knowledge of the area. This extra level of on-the-ground knowledge provided confidence that the native grassland wasn't being impacted by the project's construction and operational plans. The permit was submitted end of February 2022. A favorable letter in the eyes of the PSC was provided on behalf of the project from state agencies and presented during the public hearing.

Various mitigation and conservation plans were developed to provide confidence that the project took the species and habitat into full consideration when siting the wind turbines and project infrastructure.

The time spent collaborating with consultants, legal experts, and state agencies resulted in a favorable outcome for the project which received its state permit from the Public Service Commission in Q4 2022.

CONCLUSIONS

As the demand for renewable energy intensifies among state governments, a formidable challenge emerges the need to secure social acceptance and navigate the complexities of obtaining a permit from a state agency. While the permitting process allows developers to adopt a pragmatic strategy and gain social acceptance, it also introduces binary project risk.

Going above and beyond the standard process of submitting project permits can mitigate the chances of receiving a denial that will ultimately shut down a renewable energy project. This entails a comprehensive approach involving on-the-ground exploration of local issues, collaboration with officials to identify solutions, and the presentation of data showcasing project alignment with local and state agency guidelines.

Following policies in North Dakota, the Project had been sited and designed to minimize adverse human and environmental impacts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to everyone who worked on that project. It took a lot of time and effort to complete new work streams and submit a state permit in the timeline provided.

REFERENCES

- North Dakota Public Service Commission. Badger Wind Farm Project. 2021.

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