



September 30, 2025

Ms. Sasha Bergman

Executive Secretary
Minnesota Public Utilities Commission
121 7th Place East, Suite 350
St. Paul, MN 55101

RE: Vegetation Management Plan
Appleton to Benson HVTL Project
PUC Docket No. ET-2, E-017, ET-6135, E-100/CN-24-263; TL-24-264
OAH Docket No. 23-2500-40748

Ms. Bergman:

PUC EIP staff, on behalf of the interagency Vegetation Management Planning Working Group (VMPWG), respectfully submits comments on the Vegetation Management Plan (VMP) proposed by Great River Energy, Otter Tail Power Company, Western Municipal Power Agency (Missouri River Energy Services), Agralite Electric Cooperative, and the City of Benson, MN (collectively referred to as “the applicants”).

The VMPWG has reviewed the draft VMP for the proposed Appleton to Benson 115 kV High Voltage Transmission Line Project (Project) included as Appendix L of the Joint Route Permit Application filed December 27, 2024.¹ The VMPWG does not recommend any action by the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission (Commission) at this time, but is providing comments to facilitate transparency in the record as the VMPWG works with the applicants to arrive at a VMP that is adequate to meet pre-construction compliance filing requirements.

Overall, the plan for site restoration and implementation appears to be achievable and includes a range of potential seed mixes that can meet the applicant’s objectives of vegetation management that will:

- Develop and maintain cooperative relationships with landowners along the ROW to accommodate reasonable requests and preferences related to ROW vegetation management.
- Comply with applicable requirements in federal, state, and local permits, licenses, and/or

¹ Great River Energy, Otter Tail Power Company, Western Municipal Power Agency (Missouri River Energy Services), Agralite Electric Cooperative, and the City of Benson, MN, *Joint Route Permit Application: Appleton to Benson 115 kV Transmission Line Project. Appendix L, Vegetation Management Plan*. December 27, 2024, eDocket No. [202412-213349-20](#).

easements.

- Prevent the introduction and spread of noxious weeds and invasive species (NWIS) due to the project.

The VMPWG is committed to working with applicants and permittees to ensure that site restoration is successful and meets the objectives laid out in the management plan. The VMPWG provides these specific comments on the plan and recommends that the applicants address these comments in their pre-construction VMP submittal:

Management Sections

- The VMPWG recommends the applicant define project “management sections” based on the different vegetation communities that planned for restoration along the route (e.g., residential turfgrass, inslopes, pollinator habitat, stormwater ponds, wetlands etc.). The Construction, Restoration, and Maintenance sections of the VMP should include general BMPs that will apply to all areas within the route, such as the clearing of dangerous trees, and be further split by management section for the discussion of any section-specific BMPs, such as the establishment requirements of pollinator habitat, or restrictions related to state-owned lands.

Site Description and Existing Conditions

- The site description should include a discussion of the variety of land use and land types long the HVTL route, including any state-enforced management or restrictions.
- The applicants are advised to add a section that describes the existing ecologically sensitive areas with the route, including but not limited to high value biological resources, protected species and native plant communities, and DNR managed lands.
- The VMP must comply with applicable Minnesota Department of Natural Resources requirements related to state-listed endangered and threatened species in accordance with Minnesota's Endangered Species Statute (Minnesota Statutes, section 84.0895) and associated Rules (Minnesota Rules, part 6212.1800 to 6212.2300 and 6134). The applicant must keep records of compliance with this section and provide them upon the request of Department of Commerce or Commission staff.
- In addition to state-listed and endangered species, consider the following sensitive areas in your environmental setting section:
 - Crossing lands with tribal interest.
 - Lands with cultural or historic interest.
 - Identify calcareous fens and rare natural communities under WCA.

Rare and Sensitive Resources

- The VMPWG requests the applicant identify and address any rare species or sensitive resources within the proposed route. The following information should be included in the environmental setting section of the VMP:

- A conservation planning project report from MN DNR Minnesota Conservation Explorer tool (<https://mce.dnr.state.mn.us/>) to identify conservation areas of concern along the proposed route.
- The rare species requirements from DNR Natural Heritage Review.

Vegetation Clearing

- Project clearing should be designed to avoid impacts to bats, nesting birds, and migratory birds in preparation for route-specific permit conditions and avoidance measures. The applicant is advised that coordination with DNR may be necessary to ensure impacts are appropriately avoided. The VMP should include additional detail about tree removal timing and anticipated acreage to minimize impacts and comply with avoidance plans. The VMP should include species-specific identification and monitoring to ensure consistency with applicable avoidance measures (e.g., NHIS or USFWS) or special permit conditions.
- The applicant should clarify if any mitigative strategies will take place to reduce the impacts of tree removal. (e.g., providing brush piles for wildlife habitat, following guidance for seed mixes under wire area, harvesting forage/hay as a management tactic with landowner agreement.)
- The applicant should clarify if there will be herbicide application to stumps and identify the type and application method of said herbicides.

Erosion and Sediment Control BMPs

- The project erosion control BMPs are currently described as limited to 'bio-netting' or 'natural netting' types and specifically shall not include products containing plastic mesh netting or other plastic components. This is a wildlife friendly choice, and the applicant is encouraged to continuously align project design in consistency with DNR's wildlife-friendly erosion control standards.
- Clarify how erosion control and pollution prevention methods will be deployed in order to reduce the impact of vegetative clearing near wetland shorelines and public waters.

Herbicide Application

- Herbicide should be applied as a spot treatment to limit the likelihood of spray drift. If broadcast spray applications are anticipated, the applicant should include a plan in the VMP to prevent herbicide spray drift from entering existing native plant communities, sensitive areas, or landowner properties.
- The applicant should provide additional information regarding herbicide use, including herbicide type, surfactant rate, and frequency.

Restoration and Establishment

- Clarify if cover crops or temporary seed mixes will be integrated into permanent seed mix, or if it is largely planned for pre-seeding.

- Include more information on temporary stabilization methods. It is recommended to follow DNR recommendations related to wildlife friendly erosion control, and the avoidance of plastic materials or chemical treatments. As previously stated, erosion control blankets should be limited to natural netting. It is also recommended to avoid the use of mulch materials that contain plastic or weeds. Certified weed-free mulch can be purchased, and wood or straw mulch is a wildlife friendly choice.
- The applicant should provide more detail about how areas will be identified for natural revegetation vs. seed installation.
- The discussion of site preparation should include more details about soil preparation prior to seeding, including methods for decompaction and loosening soils, and the eradication of remaining noxious or invasive species.

Seed Mixes

- The VMPWG encourages the applicant's intended use of diverse, native perennial seed mixes in the route to the maximum extent possible, such as within landowner-approved pollinator vegetation, as they provide maximal wildlife and ecosystem benefits. Additionally, the VMPWG appreciates the use of BWSR and MnDOT seed mixes, and recommends that seed mixes should be considered to address site-specific needs.
- Project seed mixes should be chosen with the following considerations, with the acknowledgement that they may not be applicable to the management sections that are restored to agricultural or residential lawn use:
 - Plant species should be consistent with the surrounding vegetation, and both seed mixes and management should be tailored to geography, native ecosystem, and soil type. The applicant is advised to consider the effects of sunlight exposure, moisture levels, topography, and climate resilience on plant establishment when selecting seed mixes.
 - The applicant should utilize native seed mixes when appropriate or required by permit. Native seed mixes should be used on borders with Native Plant Communities, Minnesota Biological Survey Sites of Biodiversity Significance, and/or sensitive natural areas. Transmission line routes can provide habitat and act as dispersal corridors for wildlife, and the applicant is encouraged to promote the creation and restoration of wildlife habitat along the route.
 - The applicant is advised to coordinate with the VMPWG to review seed mix changes or substitutions for re-seeding.
- EIP staff and partner agencies request that the applicant provide a list of species substitutions for each seed mix. The applicant can work directly with EIP, BWSR, and DNR or use the seed substitution list provided by BWSR. The goal is to ensure that the ecological niche and guild of a plant species is retained when substitutions are necessary.

Vegetation Management

- Vegetation management methods should be timed to avoid impacts to ground-nesting birds, bats, pollinators, and other wildlife. Vegetation management methods should also be tailored to

the specific management section and the appropriate land use type, such as the management of pollinator vegetation vs. turf grass.

Monitoring and Inspections

- The VMPWG recommends that monitoring and inspections be conducted by a qualified, third-party monitor with sufficient botanical experience in identifying native plants, native plant communities, invasive species, and non-native species typical of Minnesota.
- The applicants should describe the monitoring plan for areas where seeding and erosion control measures have been implemented. The monitoring plan should define the threshold upon which reseeding measures will be needed. The applicant is advised to coordinate with the VMPWG to review seed mix changes or substitutions for re-seeding.
- An annual monitoring report allows for revisions to the project VMP based on any shortcomings or challenges experienced during implementation. The VMPWG recommends the adoption of an annual reporting approach to keep the VMP “alive” and on track for successful implementation and long-term success. The contents of annual monitoring reports should be defined, and a submission protocol should be established within the VMP.

Updates to the Vegetation Management Plan

- The VMPWG understands that the applicants are still finalizing aspects of the VMP and requests that they continue to coordinate with EIP and other state agencies as the VMP is finalized prior to construction.

In summary, EIP staff recommends that the applicants continue to coordinate with the VMPWG as it finalizes the vegetation management plan, including the identification of existing rare and sensitive resources, refinement of the installation, management, and monitoring plans to fit the anticipated goals and objectives, and an updated monitoring and inspection reporting plan. The VMPWG looks forward to the successful site restoration of the Appleton to Benson 115 kV Transmission Project. The VMPWG will provide additional review and recommendations to the Commission as part of its pre-construction compliance review.

The VMPWG appreciates the opportunity to comment on the proposed Appleton to Benson 115 kV Transmission Project.

Sincerely,



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PUC EIP Environmental Review Manager



Jessica Livingston
PUC EIP Environmental Review Manager

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CC:

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