

January 20, 2026

Ms. Sasha Bergman

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

RE: Vegetation Management Plan
Blue Lake Battery Energy Storage Project
PUC Docket No. E002/ESS-25-214
CAH Docket No. 25-2500-41199

Ms. Bergman:

The VMPWG has reviewed the draft VMP provided for the proposed Blue Lake Battery Energy Storage Project (Project) included as Appendix D of the Site Permit Application filed June 20, 2025.¹ 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 Blue Lake to arrive at a VMP that is adequate to meet pre-construction compliance filing requirements.

The VMPWG provides recommended modifications to be made that will ensure the applicant meets the proposed site permit condition² of a vegetation management plan that includes:

- Management objectives addressing short term (year 0-5, seeding and establishment) and long term (year 5 through the life of the Project) goals;
- A description of planned restoration and vegetation management activities, including how the site will be prepared, timing of activities, how seeding will occur (e.g., broadcast, drilling, etc.), and the types of seed mixes to be used;
- A description of how the site will be monitored and evaluated to meet management goals;
- A description of the management tools used to maintain vegetation (e.g., mowing, spot spraying, hand removal, fire, grazing, etc.), including the timing and frequency of maintenance activities;

¹ Xcel Energy, Application for Site Permit, Appendix D: Preliminary Vegetation Management Plan. June 20, 2025, eDocket No. [20256-220093-07](#).

² PUC EIP, Blue Lake BESS Environmental Assessment: Appendix C – Draft Site Permit. Section 5.8: Vegetation Management Plan. December 17, 2025. eDocket no. [202512-225963-01](#).

- Identification of the third-party (e.g., consultant, contractor, site manager, etc.) contracted for restoration, monitoring, and long-term vegetation management of the site;
- Identification of on-site noxious weeds and invasive species (native and non-native) and the monitoring and management practices to be utilized; and
- A marked-up copy of the Site Plan showing how the site will be revegetated and that identifies the corresponding seed mixes. Best management practices should be followed concerning seed mixes, seeding rates, and cover crops.

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 site permit. The VMPWG provides these specific comments on the plan and recommends that Blue Lake address these comments in its pre-construction VMP submittal:

Project Description

- The applicant should provide a complete project description that includes all temporary and permanent project facilities and equipment, such as battery cells, inverters, transformers, substations, collection lines, interconnection facilities, access roads, stormwater basins, fencing, etc.

Site Description

- The applicant should provide information on the existing conditions of the site, including land use and land cover, soils, hydrology, and topography. Corresponding figures should be included in text or as an attachment to the document.
- The applicant should further identify the acreage and site percentage of impervious surfaces vs. areas that will be managed or seeded with current design.

Goals and Objectives

- The applicant should define vegetation management objectives that correspond to the existing VMP site permit condition requirements. Clear objectives on how these results will be achieved should be provided for the overall plan. Short-term and long-term management goals and objectives are also necessary for each management unit (BESS area, gen-tie line area, etc.).

Management Units

- The impervious to pervious surface ratio is an important factor in vegetation management. The applicant should define and describe both the areas that will be seeded, the Vegetation Management Units (VMUs), and the unseeded area that will contain project components, the Non-Vegetated Management Unit (NVMUs), including the anticipated acreage of impervious surface (gravel, concrete, etc.). The applicant should also describe how the site prep and vegetation removal will occur in each management unit, depending on its planned use. This framing of management units should be maintained throughout the VMP.

Site Preparation

- The applicant should describe the sequence of planned construction, planting, and management activities leading up to permanent vegetation installation, including site clearing, grading, vegetation removal, invasive species management, and the use of temporary seeding or other erosion control methods.
- The VMUs may require different site preparation methods due to characteristics such as soil properties or temporary saturation. The applicant should describe additional site preparation techniques that may be required in specific VMUs or under certain circumstances.
- The applicant is advised to verify the chemical application history of the site to determine if special methods will be necessary to allow for successful native vegetation establishment.

Vegetation Installation

- For each VMU, the applicant should include a description of the areas that will be seeded within the BESS site, including seedbed preparation techniques, methods of installation, timing of planting, and anticipated seed mix.
- Cover crops are often used to stabilize soils and reduce weeds during site restoration. In addition to suppressing weeds, cover crops also can suppress and reduce germination of desired species. The applicant indicates that cover crops may be used in the BESS site. The applicant is advised to consult with the VMPWG when integrating cover crops with seed mixes in the BESS site.

Seed Mixes

- The applicant should identify the seed mixes planned for site restoration and include a description of how the seed mixes are consistent with planned use within the BESS site.
- The VMPWG recommends the use of diverse, native perennial seed mixes, which provide maximal wildlife and ecosystem benefits, rather than the non-native grassland state seed mixes referenced. BWSR provides specifically designed seed mixes that can meet the site and permit conditions needs. PUC EIP and partner agencies request that the applicant provide a list of species substitutions for each seed mix, when applicable. The applicant can work directly with PUC 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.

Visual Screening

- The applicant should clarify whether vegetative screening will be utilized for this project, as the use of vegetative screening will require the development of a visual screening plan. Native species should be used for vegetative screening.

Concrete and Gravel Components

- The applicant should include a description of the planned amounts of concrete or gravel to be used within the BESS site. The applicant should address how the increase in impervious surface may influence other factors within the site, such as runoff.
- In the case of gravel use, describe the particle size class and soil classification of the gravel used in the BESS site. The VMPWG recommends the use of locally sourced gravel, as it is more suited to the environment of the project location.

Herbicide Use and Weed Control

- The applicant should provide information on herbicide type and anticipated herbicide use, including surfactant rate, and frequency. The applicant is advised that widespread application of herbicides may act as a pre-emergent and reduce germination of desired vegetation.
- The control of woody species and shrubs is discussed in various areas throughout the VMP. The applicant should include a separate section that describes the specific mechanical or chemical techniques to be used when controlling invasive woody species such as trees and shrubs.

Vegetation Management

- The applicant should describe the vegetation management techniques that will be used in project VMUs and NVMUs, as applicable, throughout project operation for the life of the permit.

Monitoring and Reporting

- Monitoring should be conducted by a qualified, third party, independent agency. The selected monitor should have sufficient botanical experience in identifying native plants, native plant communities, invasive species, and non-native species typical of Minnesota. The applicant should develop a monitoring plan that includes both quantitative and qualitative methods.
- An annual monitoring report allows for VMP revisions based on any shortcomings or challenges faced during the reporting period. The annual report will be key to keeping the VMP “alive” and on track for successful implementation and long-term success. The applicant should define the monitoring and reporting that will be conducted throughout the project lifetime. Annual monitoring reports for each growing season should be filed with the Commission on a yearly basis.

Updates to the Vegetation Management Plan

- The VMPWG understands that Blue Lake is still finalizing aspects of the VMP and requests that Blue Lake continue to coordinate with PUC EIP staff and other state agencies as the VMP is finalized prior to construction.

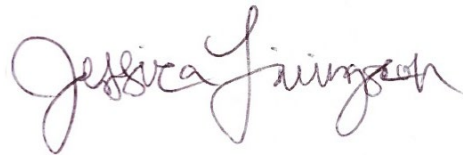
In summary, PUC EIP staff recommend that the applicant continue to coordinate with the VMPWG as it finalizes the vegetation management plan in order to meet the anticipated site permit conditions, including the establishment of short- and long-term management goals, defining VMUs, identification of appropriate seed mixes, and refinement of the installation, management, and monitoring plans. The VMPWG looks forward to the successful site restoration of the Blue Lake Battery Energy Storage Project. The VMPWG will provide additional review and recommendations to the Commission as part of PUC EIP staff pre-construction compliance review.

The VMPWG appreciates the opportunity to comment on the proposed Blue Lake Battery Energy Storage Project.

Sincerely,



Lauren Agnew
PUC EIP Environmental Review Manager



Jessica Livingston
PUC EIP EERA Environmental Review Manager

CC:

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Vegetation Management Planning Working Group Comments
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