

November 23, 2020

Executive Secretary Will Seuffert
Minnesota Public Utilities Commission
121 7th Place East
Suite 350
Saint Paul, MN 55101-2147

RE: Elk Creek Solar Project in Rock County
Public Utilities Commission Docket Number: IP7009/GS-19-495

Dear Secretary Seuffert:

On behalf of Commissioner Petersen, Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) appreciates the opportunity to provide comment on the Elk Creek Solar project in Rock County Minnesota.

MDA's role in reviewing energy projects under the regulatory authority of the Public Utility Commission (PUC) is confined to those aspects of a project that affect agricultural practice and, principally, the soil resource that supports agriculture. We have participated in proceedings on previous solar projects before the PUC, beginning with the Marshall Solar project in 2026, and in the Commission's rulemaking proceedings concerning the prime farmland exclusion in Minnesota Rule 7850.4400, Subpart 4 in 2018.

Recently, MDA staff has worked closely with the Department of Commerce – Energy Environmental Review and Analysis (EERA) on developing a document titled "Solar Energy Production and Prime Farmland - Guidance for Evaluating Prudent and Feasible Alternatives" which is meant to assist developers to address the requirements of Minnesota Rule 7850.4400, Subpart 4, in particular, the "no feasible and prudent alternative" provision which requires the applicant to clearly demonstrate that they could not find an alternative site to the one they propose.

MDA recognizes the inherent environmental value that renewable energy development brings to the State of Minnesota, however, we also realize that most of this development will occur in agricultural portions of the state. Solar development, in particular, can have a significant impact on agriculture due to the amount of land utility-scale solar development requires as well as the potential to impact the soil resource. The SONAR for the Power Plant Siting Act Rule, in regard to Part 7850.4400, Subpart 4, established a clear reasoning for the selection of prime farmland as the soil type to be protected, not just for its productive capacity, but equally, for its ability to minimize the environmental impacts of agricultural production. Prime farmland is a uniquely important natural resource to agriculture and must be managed with care and consideration.

Although the applicant of the Elk Creek Solar Project did not have timely access to the recently developed guidance document, applicant still must address the requirements of the rule. MDA agrees with the EERA and supports their conclusions that the project proposer has not met those requirements. In comments submitted to the docket, EERA has outlined the specific shortcomings in the application. MDA would add that we believe that feasible and prudent alternatives do exist as evidenced by North Star Solar, currently in operation, and other proposed projects, e.g., Regal Solar and Royal Solar. These projects all avoid prime farmland and indicate that alternative sites with necessary access to grid interconnects do exist.

MDA thanks you for the opportunity to submit these comments on the Elk Creek Solar project in Rock County Minnesota. If you have any questions about MDA's comments please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephan Roos". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Stephan" and last name "Roos" clearly distinguishable.

Stephan Roos
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cc: Commissioner Thom Petersen, MDA
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