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February 23, 2004

2/4/04
69 FR 5374
(51)

Chief, Rules and Directives Branch
Mail Stop T6-D59
U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Washington, DC 20555-0001

Re: Docket No. 70-3103
NMGF Project No. 9200

Dear Nuclear Regulatory Commission:

The New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (Department) has received the Notice of Intent to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the proposed Louisiana Energy Services (LES) gas centrifuge uranium enrichment facility, known as the National Enrichment Facility (NEF). We have reviewed the Environmental Report (ER) submitted by LES with their license application, as it pertains to wildlife resources, and offer our comments below. We also enclose for your information a copy of our September 30, 2003, scoping letter to LES contractor Framatome ANP.

The Department is concerned about the adequacy of the assessment in the ER of potential impacts to the NM State Threatened sand dune lizard (*Scleroporus arenicolus*). Section 3.5.3 states that although "(t)he NEF site contains areas of sand dunes", "(a) survey of the NEF site did not identify any sand dune lizard habitats". Section 3.5.5 characterizes the site vegetation as dense shrubs, mostly shinnery oak (*Quercus havardi*), yet Section 3.5.6 concludes the habitat is unsuitable due to "low frequency of shinnery oak dunes and large blowouts". Section 3.5.8 asserts that "the site does contain sand dune – oak shinnery communities, that could be potential sand dune lizard habitat". Finally Section 4.5.7 refers to the site having "the potential to provide habitat for the sand dune lizard" but "various factors make it unsuitable". This accumulation of seemingly contradictory statements leaves it unclear whether there is in fact suitable habitat for the species or not.

The ER also refers to a survey for sand dune lizards that took place in October 2003 and did not find any. No information is given as to the participants or methods of the survey. If there is in fact suitable habitat, the Department requests information as to the qualifications of the individual(s) conducting the survey. Sand dune lizards are extremely difficult to identify and there are only a very few people qualified to conduct a presence/absence survey. October is rather late in the year for a survey; the lizards are likely to be dormant at that time.

E-RIDS=ADM-03
Add=T. Johnson (TCJ)
M. Along (MCW)

Template=ADM-013

The Department is likewise concerned about the adequacy of assessment in the ER of potential impacts on the lesser prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicintus*), a federal Species of Concern. The document identifies the site as suitable habitat, states that the nearest known lek (breeding area) is 4 miles distant, and refers to a survey conducted in September 2003, that did not find any lesser prairie chickens. According to our prairie chicken biologist, the area around the project has not been adequately surveyed for lek sites. Surveys should be conducted in the spring (typically early to mid April, before sunrise). Lesser prairie chickens will use an area within two miles of the lek for nesting and rearing. Birds have been reported from the Eunice area. Since there is a large acreage of contiguous habitat, and a lek within four miles, it is reasonable to assume these birds may be impacted by the development.

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) analysis should include assessment of cumulative regional impacts on both of these sensitive species. Other impacts include grazing and oil and gas development.

Although not directly a wildlife habitat issue, the Department would like to express our concern regarding the lack of a final disposal alternative for the depleted uranium tails. The ER presents several plausible options, however each of them faces significant problems and would require many years of feasibility analysis and development. The safeguards and procedures for short- to medium-term storage of the materials seem adequate to prevent health or environmental hazards, however the lack of a viable solution for disposal may lead to environmental exposure of radioactive materials in the long term.

LES proposes a number of favorable mitigations, including the use of native plant species for revegetation, downshielding site illumination to reduce impact on bird behavior, various habitat improvements and following the Department's recommendations regarding pipeline trenching and exclusion of migratory birds from the evaporative ponds. These mitigations should be incorporated into the license approval, if granted. The Department remains available for further consultation on development of possible mitigations.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the preparation of NEPA analysis and documentation for this project. If you have any questions, please contact Rachel Jankowitz at 505-476-8159 or rjankowitz@state.nm.us.

Sincerely,

Lisa Kirkpatrick

Lisa Kirkpatrick, Chief
Conservation Services Division

LK/rjj

cc: Joy Nicholopoulos, Ecological Services Field Supervisor, USFWS
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