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Heckington Fen Solar Park Statutory Consultation – Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust Comments

The Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust would like to respond to the Heckington Fen Solar Park Proposal as part of the statutory consultation. We base our response largely on the Environment Statement Chapter 8 – Ecology and Ornithology, its associated Figures and Appendices and the Outline LEMP. These comments follow those previously submitted by LWT on 15th February and 12th August 2022 and are informed by national guidance for biodiversity on solar developments[1]. We would also refer readers of these comments to National Policy Statements EN-1, EN-3 and EN-5, NPPF (2021) paragraphs 8c, 174, 180, 182, the Central Lincolnshire Local Plan policies S60, S61 & S66 and South East Lincolnshire Local Plan 2011-2036 Policy 28 - The Natural Environment.

We are satisfied that all ecological surveys were carried out at appropriate times of the year (Table 8.1) and the Environment Statement in general is very detailed and well thought out. This has been a common thread throughout our engagement with Heckington Fen Solar Park.

The proposed ecological enhancements for the park during its operational phase (figure 4.1e) shows the various intersecting boundary treatments forming wildlife corridors through the site to the surrounding landscape (with Head Dike being a ecologically significant connection along the northern boundary). The work conducted during consultation to move various infrastructure and equipment closer together onsite and at fewer locations (February 2023 update) improves this further.

The habitat enhancement areas have been reduced in number following consultation and agricultural land grade assessment. This reduced enhancement area would still result in a high BNG value for the site (though this has yet to be calculated for the development since) while allowing the fields between the A17 road and the panel arrays to remain in agricultural production. This loss in area has meant the latest revisions do not include dedicated areas for skylark plots which require large areas of open space for breeding success. The field parcels to contain panel arrays, and their enhanced sward as a result, are likely to be suitable feeding areas of skylarks but these should also be supplemented with viable breeding spaces. There are currently few, if any, records of skylark successfully breeding between panel arrays of solar farms, though there is scant research in this area.

[1] BRE (2014) Biodiversity Guidance for Solar Developments. Eds G E Parker and L Green and Natural England Technical Information Note TIN101 © Natural England 2011 First edition 9th September 2011 - Solar parks: maximising environmental benefits

Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust in principle understands that an individual solar farm may not have a negative impact on ground nesting birds such as skylark and lapwing, at a population level. But we have taken the decision due to the sheer volume of solar farm developments being applied for across Greater Lincolnshire including NSIPs, that we will take a consistent approach, as we believe cumulatively, there is true potential to impact populations in Greater Lincolnshire.

Following the most recent contact with the ecology team for Heckington Fen Solar Park, there remains an option for further research to be conducted on the solar farm site in regards to the potential retrospective creation of skylark plots (Paragraph 2.12 Outline LEMP, ref: 7.8). We would strongly encourage this option be taken up by the applicant as this could build on our limited knowledge of behavioural changes in farmland bird species as a result of solar farm development.

The Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust hopes these comments are helpful at this stage and welcomes further discussion relating to the points covered.

Yours sincerely,

[redacted]

Ashley Reaney

Conservation Officer