



Bird Observation & Conservation Australia

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14th April 2008

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Reference number 2008/4128 Acciona Energy/Energy generation and supply (renewable)/Mortlake/VIC/Mortlake Wind Farm

Bird Observation & Conservation Australia (BOCA) is a national non-government organisation with more than 3,000 members throughout Australia. BOCA's objectives may be summarised as appreciation, education and conservation relating to Australian birds and their habitat.

BOCA is concerned that the proposed Mortlake Wind Farm (the Proposal) may have a significant impact on bird species protected by the EPBC Act and that these impacts have not been adequately assessed by Acciona Energy (the Proponent).

Specifically, BOCA has serious concerns about the validity of surveys (Proposal Annexes D-F) used to assess the potential impact of the Proposal on bird species protected by the EPBC Act. These concerns are outlined below.

1. The Bird Utilisation Study (Annex D) is not comprehensive enough to determine the likely impact of the Proposal on migratory bird species listed under the EPBC Act.

The Bird Utilisation Survey used to determine the presence/ status of threatened or endangered bird species in the area is inadequate. The survey was conducted over a single, five day period in September 2007. This is an insufficient period of time in which to assess the long-term significance of the area for **any** species. It does not take into account seasonal movements of local or migratory species and cannot be seen as an accurate representation of the significance of the area for EPBC-listed species. While this limitation is noted in the Proposal, '*At this time*

Helping today's birds survive tomorrow

*of year, most migratory bird species would be absent ...*¹, the remainder of the Proposal assumes complete accuracy of the survey and that the Brolga is the only bird species that may be significantly affected by the Proposal. Migratory species listed under the EPBC Act that may be affected by this Proposal are: Latham's Snipe, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Eastern Curlew, Common Sandpiper, Greenshank, and Glossy Ibis (S. Mudford 2008 pers. comm.). These species are also listed under the JAMBA (except Glossy Ibis) and CAMBA agreements.

¹ Annex D, Section 3.5.1, page 23, paragraph 6

Recommendation

BOCA recommends that a more comprehensive study be undertaken to assess the likely impact of the Proposal on migratory bird species listed under the EPBC Act.

2. The Brolga surveys (Annexes E-F) are inadequate. They cannot be used to determine the likely impact of the Proposal on the Brolga population in Western Victoria.

All Brolga surveys included in the Proposal were undertaken over extremely short periods of time and all were within a **single** breeding season. BOCA considers that these surveys were not comprehensive enough to determine the long term impact of the Proposal on the local Brolga population. In particular, as Western Victoria is affected by prolonged drought, many wetlands that may be used as flocking/ breeding sites are likely to be dry. The long-term significance of these sites to the species cannot be assessed by these surveys.

Among the many assumptions underlying these surveys, is the assumption that the only threat to Brolgas from the Proposal is that of collision causing injury or death. No consideration is given to the short term effects of construction or long term effects of the presence of turbines on the behaviour of Brolgas; it does not consider that Brolgas may perceive the turbines as a threat/ danger and abandon current breeding sites.

A further assumption underlying the calculation of collision risk is that a 95% avoidance factor may be applied to Brolgas. There is no scientific evidence to support this. The 95% avoidance factor is broadly applied to all bird species irrespective of their flight characteristics and behaviours. Brolgas are a particularly large bird and their ability to manoeuvre around rapidly moving turbines, particularly when taking off or landing, is unknown.

Specific concerns about survey methodology are detailed below.

BOCA considers that the survey of Brolga breeding sites (Annex E) is inadequate and cannot be used to assess the significance of the Proposal for the species.

The initial surveys used to determine the status, distribution and possible breeding of the Brolga in the vicinity of the Proposal (Annex E) were limited in both extent and duration. The surveys note the following limitations of the study:

- The surveys were only undertaken over a 5 day period in August 2007;
- Access to breeding sites was not comprehensive, most assessments were done from roadsides; and
- Nesting sites could have been missed when Brolgas were absent from nests.

Despite acknowledging these limitations, the remainder of the calculations of the likely **long-term** impacts of the Proposal on Brolga populations, including collision risks, are based on these figures. For example, all calculations in Annexes D-F assume a static population of 6 pairs of Brolgas in the vicinity of the Proposal. There is no scientific evidence to support this assumption.

BOCA considers that the survey of Brolga migration (Annex F) is inadequate and cannot be used to assess the significance of the Proposal for the species.

The 'Migration Season Impact Assessment' (Annex F) was limited in extent and duration. It was conducted over six, non-consecutive days and made intermittent observations of Brolga behaviour. All calculations of collision risks in Annex F assumed that the results of the previous surveys (Annexes D & E) were valid and scientifically accurate.

Unlike the authors of the breeding study (Annex D), the authors of the migration study openly discuss the limited nature of the survey and the limited knowledge of the breeding and migration patterns of Brolga. There are numerous references to this, a small number are quoted below;

*'As little is known about seasonal movements and potential migration paths between breeding and flocking sites, it is difficult to ascertain whether Brolgas regularly move over the Mortlake South site during this time of the year.'*²

*'Given the limited amount of data (ie. a single season of survey), it is difficult to know for certain whether this is a regular movement path.'*³

*'Given that no information currently exists on the directions individual or groups of birds may fly when moving between breeding and flocking sites, ...'*⁴

*'Therefore, mortality estimates and recommendations of the configuration, or individual siting of turbines, have been made on limited data and information.'*⁵

*'It should be noted that this is not a detailed risk assessment model and the calculations here are based on a number of qualifications and assumptions.'*⁶

The final quotation is supported by an extensive list of qualifications and assumptions.

Comments from the authors of the migration survey largely support the view that we lack detailed knowledge of Brolga migration patterns.

In summary, the present surveys can only be seen as a further confirmation of our lack of knowledge about the breeding, flocking and migration behaviour of Brolgas in Western Victoria. The surveys should be viewed as little more than casual observations and speculations thinly guised as science. They cannot be seen as a substitute for a larger, more comprehensive study of the breeding, flocking and migration behaviour of Brolgas in Western Victoria.

Recommendation

BOCA submits that the precautionary principle should be applied to this Proposal and it should not be allowed to proceed in its present form. As a minimum precaution, any future proposals by the Proponent should include large buffer zones - in the order of kilometres - around areas assessed as being suitable Brolga breeding or flocking sites. The magnitude of these buffer zones should be informed by an extensive, long-term study of the migration patterns of Brolga in Western Victoria.

Yours sincerely



Richard Hunter
Chief Executive Officer

Reference:

Sue Mudford
Regional Manager - Glenelg Hopkins Region
Trust for Nature (Victoria)

²Annex F references: page 30, final paragraph

³page 31, paragraph 2

⁴page 32, paragraph 2

⁵page 42, paragraph 2

⁶page 34, paragraph 2