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Protecting the environment for wildlife in support of the natural world that sustains us all.

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Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
EnergyPermitting@mass.gov
Electronic submission via email

BEAT Comments for Massachusetts Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs Draft Guidance on Site Suitability Assessments for Clean Energy Infrastructure

Please accept these comments from Berkshire Environmental Action Team (BEAT) regarding the draft guidance on Site Suitability for Clean Energy Infrastructure. BEAT is a 501(c)(3) non-profit whose mission is to protect the environment for wildlife in support of the natural world that sustains us all.

Given the acceleration of the climate crisis and rising energy prices because of over-reliance on fossil fuels in our energy sector, BEAT supports rapid deployment of renewables, but not at the expense of environmental damage or public health and safety. Achieving a more streamlined permitting process should not come at the expense of local control, nor should it permit developers to evade proper project planning and siting processes that protect natural resources, local economies, and public health and safety. It is worth noting that even if project approvals are streamlined at the state level, the ISO New England grid interconnection queue obstacle may still add years to a project's timeline¹.

¹ BEAT had the experience of working closely with a BESS project developer after petitioning for them to cease fossil fuel operation of their peaker power plant in West Springfield. The project had all the right criteria: re-use of the existing industrial site and its brownfields, removal of a large fossil fuel emissions source, existing isolation from any sensitive habitats, and existing interconnection to the grid, using existing interconnection hardware. The ISO New England interconnection study process took 855 days to complete. Hopefully this is an extreme example of delay from ISO New England, but it is certainly not an isolated one. Expedited permitting at the local and state level will not resolve this issue. Please do not take on possibly harmful aspects of regulation to streamline state and local permitting, when reform at the regional grid level could go far to reduce delays in clean energy adoption.
[West Springfield's Peaker plant part of clean energy transition study](#), Mass Live, October 21, 2024

Thank you for these beneficial considerations of suitability criteria, including:

- The criteria scoring system is a good way to organize considerations of project siting and clearly builds strong incentives for development on already disturbed land.
- Consideration of the impacts of transmission and/or distribution siting tied to a project, with incentives for shorter distances and use of existing rights of way.
- Consideration of Core Habitat, Critical Natural Landscapes and Regional Connectivity.

We have concerns about the draft guidance in these areas:

- **Loss of local control.** This proposed regulation largely relegates municipalities to a consultative role for large projects, and even allows the state to have the final word in disputes over small projects. A strong concern we're hearing from smaller towns is the lack of determination over how many large projects the state can approve for any one municipality. In the smaller rural towns, there are often multiple project proposals happening because of what project applicants see as the "low cost" of green fields locations. Without being able to limit the amount of projects, and the chance that each project is weighed on its own merits, not on the cumulative impacts of multiple projects being considered simultaneously, there is a high chance that the environmental functioning and rural nature of smaller towns may be permanently altered.
- **The potential for excessive allowance of mitigation plans could allow unwarranted environmental disruption.** Limit mitigation capabilities for "unsuitable, high impact" proposals. We do not want to grant the ability of developers to engage in "pay to play" where long-term or permanent damage might be done. Communities should have the ability to reject projects with a high score. "Unsuitable" proposals should remain unpermitted.

Agricultural and wild lands are foundational to the state's rural economies. Furthermore, natural, undeveloped land and forests provide critical services like storm runoff management, water filtration and purification, regional cooling, and habitat for essential species; they are also crucial to public health and productivity of our farmlands. While the scoring system devised in these regulations are well weighted toward incentivizing clean energy development on disturbed locations, allowing mitigation measures could lead to harmful outcomes in rural regions, where natural and productive lands make up the majority of acreage. Mitigation plans must be carefully weighed against the full set of costs brought on by permanent or long term loss of natural assets to public health and safety, economic impacts to businesses reliant on the function and character of natural or productive lands, and the climate mitigation services provided. In light of the state's biodiversity goals, long-term or permanent disruption to local ecosystems is all the more consequential.

Allowance of mitigation to make a project permittable should be minimized.

- **More complex consideration of siting (IV.C.) Criteria is needed**

- (C.i. - Climate Change Resilience) Deeper considerations of the impact of projects in undisturbed lands and forests that provide ecosystem services as stated above should be part of Climate Change Resilience considerations, not just the risks to proposed projects. Climate Change risks to proposed projects also need to evaluate more than just flooding, including the effects of extreme and prolonged heat waves, the increasing prevalence of wildfires, extreme cold “polar vortex” events and rapid temperature swings.

- (C. ii - Carbon Storage and Sequestration.) Thank you for adding specific consideration of loss of forested land under “C. ii. Carbon Storage and Sequestration”. However, as stated under our comments about over-use of mitigation tactics, there are many more functions of forested land that we rely on, including protection and preservation of clean watersheds. These functions also need to be preserved. Any proposals for forested land without an alternative location analysis should be sent back as incomplete and required to look for locations on disturbed land and brownfields first during the prefilling phase. This rule should be deployed for protecting critical biodiversity and interconnection habitat of a 2.5 value and above and agricultural resource of 2.5 value or above.

- (C. v. - Social and Environmental Burdens)

Thank you for using census block level analysis instead of zip code for Social and Environmental Burdens. Conditions can vary widely within one zip code. Pittsfield is a stark example, with a life expectancy discrepancy of 12.5 years between census tracts in the center of the city, and those on the more affluent and verdant outlying neighborhoods.

Using the Mass Enviro Screen is an excellent start to considering a location’s rating, but please also take into account other infrastructure, industrial, manufacturing or transportation in close proximity to the project location. For individual locations that already endure high economic, health and environmental burdens due to racial, income, education level, and other environmental justice factors, a project that may appear beneficial on paper may in reality pose an excessive burden to a community. We strongly encourage referencing the state overview of social impacts by the Office of Environmental Justice and Equity (OEJE) through direct conversation with communities impacted by a proposed project.

- **Recommendations for (IV.D.) Score Modifiers**

- (D.iii. - Social and Environmental Benefits)

The list of subtractors for benefits looks very good, but there needs to be more specific clarification about what constitutes the “creation or maintenance of local jobs.” Most jobs associated with implementation of solar, wind or BESS require technical training or certification. Does the modifier account for that training being provided to local residents? Does it address the high incidence of people being blocked from these jobs

by overly strict CORI standards?²


Also, since many clean energy facilities are largely to entirely automated or managed remotely, many of the jobs created are installation and construction only, making them temporary. Although the number of construction jobs these projects bring can be considerable, these cannot be considered on-going local jobs unless there are on-site or nearby office positions. We encourage a nuanced evaluation of the nature of job opportunities offered, especially if this largely temporary factor is being weighed against the more lasting impacts of a project.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft guidance. We look forward to reviewing the final version.

Respectfully submitted,



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No Fracked Gas in Mass, A Program of Berkshire Environmental Action Team

² We highly recommend that EEA, DPU and EFSB and other offices reviewing the draft of these regulations and guidelines consult with C3I coalition member groups. “[The clean energy] sector has been growing significantly in the Commonwealth since 2010, with plans to create another 30,000+ jobs in the climate industry over the next 5 to 10 years to meet our State’s climate goals, but currently about 25% of our workforce is or will be excluded from many good-paying Green jobs. **1,700,000 People** are currently excluded from high-demand Green jobs.” [The Peoples’ Coalition for Climate CORI Inclusion](#) (C3I).