



## **Vista Sands Solar FAQ: the Greater Prairie-chicken and Buena Vista Wildlife Area**

### **1) *Where is the Project located and how large is it?***

The Vista Sands Solar Project is located Portage County, Wisconsin in the Towns of Buena Vista, Grant and Plover and the Village of Plover. The Project will generate 1,310.4 Megawatts of electricity free of carbon emissions. The Proposed Panel Areas will be constructed on approximately 6,737 acres and the Alternative Panel Areas were designed on approximately 3,012 acres to exceed the Public Service Commission of Wisconsin's 25 percent standard for an Alternative Site.

### **2) *Has Vista Sands Solar consulted with Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) staff regarding the Greater Prairie-chickens (GRPC) and Buena Vista Wildlife Area (BVWA)?***

Vista Sands Solar met with representatives from WDNR in the field and virtually four times in 2023 to focus on key design principles to mitigate undue adverse impacts to the GRPC while providing ecological benefits to grassland bird species. These principles were documented in a draft Memorandum of Understanding between WDNR and Vista Sands Solar that is in review with WDNR.

### **3) *Is the Project located in the BVWA?***

No Primary or Alternative Array Areas will be located within the BVWA.

### **4) *What is the current land use of the Project Area in the vicinity of the BVWA and how is it used by GRPC?***

The Primary and Alternative Array Areas adjacent to the BVWA are cropped in a rotation largely consisting of potatoes, corn, and soybeans. Adult GRPC have been known to forage in these fields and the field edges outside of the growing season. However, these agricultural fields do not provide nesting or brood-rearing habitat. Due to the mono-cropping and regular insecticide applications to the crops, these fields are not high-quality foraging habitat for adults. One GRPC lek is known to occur within an Alternative Array Area.

### **5) *What is a GRPC lek and how far away will the panels be from the leks?***

A lek is the term used for the location that GRPC gather in the spring where males perform their courtship displays to attract females. Per WDNR's request, Vista Sands Solar has agreed not to construct any panels within 500 feet of GRPC leks identified during the WDNR 2021-2023 lek surveys.

### **6) *Is it true that the Project is proposed where a lek has been identified on private land?***

An Alternative Array Area was designed on a privately-owned agricultural parcel adjacent to the BVWA. However, Vista Sands Solar will not construct panels on that parcel. Vista Sands Solar will maintain the lek in its current conditions and restore approximately 120 contiguous acres of surrounding agricultural fields with a Grassland Solar Conservation Seed Mix.



**7) *What measures will be taken to minimize impacts to GRPC via Project fences?***

Vista Sands Solar has already agreed to placement of bird diverters on nearby Project fences in coordination with WDNR.

**8) *What will be planted underneath the panels and how will it benefit wildlife?***

Vista Sands Solar's ecologists have designed a seed mix for the paneled areas that is compatible with solar energy generation while providing benefits to native wildlife. This seed mix, named the Graminoid Plus Seed Mix, is comprised of 17 native grass and sedge species and 31 native wildflower species. It contains host plants for pollinators in their larval stage and pollinator-friendly wildflowers that will bloom throughout spring, summer, and fall, providing rich pollen and nectar sources.

The Graminoid Plus Seed Mix will directly and indirectly provide an excellent food source for grassland birds. Grasses like sideoats grama, prairie dropseed, and June grass produce seeds that grassland birds eat. More importantly, the installation of the Graminoid Plus Seed Mix will restore the native insect community, which are the basis for most grassland bird species' diets.

**9) *How many acres of grassland will be restored as a result of the Vista Sands Solar Project?***

5,700 to 7,900 acres of agricultural lands in the vicinity of BVWA will be restored to grasslands. Since 1850, the vast majority of Wisconsin's grasslands have been lost to agriculture and urban development. This Project presents an unparalleled opportunity to return thousands of acres of grasslands to Wisconsin.

**10) *Will any research be conducted to determine if the GRPC and other grassland birds use the paneled area?***

Yes, Vista Sands Solar will fund two graduate research assistantships at the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point College of Natural Resources to study avian use at the Vista Sands Solar Project.

**11) *Do the solar panels pose a collision risk to the GRPC?***

Early results from a [study](#) led by Argonne National Laboratory have not found any evidence of collisions between birds and solar panels at solar farms (Hamada, 2023). This team deployed video cameras at six solar farms across the country including three in the Midwest to record birds flying through solar farms while training an artificial intelligence system to identify bird-panel collisions and notify operators. Thirty-eight cameras were deployed and over 17,000 hours of daytime video was recorded. 13,000 bird flights were recorded, and no collisions have been confirmed to date. This research is ongoing but does not support the idea that solar panels are an undue collision risk for birds.