**Department of Energy**
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**DOE/EA-1823**

# FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT AND FLOODPLAIN STATEMENT OF FINDINGS

## ROCKFORD SOLAR ENERGY PROJECT, ROCKFORD, ILLINOIS

**AGENCY**: U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy

**ACTION**: Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

**SUMMARY**: The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) provided Federal funding, appropriated under the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009*, to the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) under the State Energy Program (SEP). The State proposes to provide a $4 million of its SEP funds to Rockford Solar Partners LLC (RSP), who would use these funds for the design, permitting, and construction of a solar photovoltaic array with a generating capacity of up to 20 megawatts (proposed project). Because the proposed project would be located at the Chicago Rockford International Airport, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has jurisdiction by law and special expertise applicable to this EA effort. For purposes of the draft Environmental Assessment (EA), DOE was the Lead Agency and the FAA was a Cooperating Agency. DOE's Proposed Action is to authorize the State expenditure of Federal funding under the SEP for the new facility. The Proposed Action also includes FAA's Proposed Actions.[1]

Before the DCEO can award funding for the proposed project, DOE must examine the potential environmental impacts of DOE's Proposed Action in accordance with the *National Environmental Policy Act of 1969* (NEPA). All discussion, analysis, and findings related to the potential impacts of construction, operation, and eventual decommissioning of the Rockford Solar Energy Recovery Project are contained in the *Final Environmental Assessment for the Rockford Solar Energy Project* (DOE/EA-1823; Final EA). The Final EA is hereby incorporated by reference.

**ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS**: The Final EA examined the potential environmental impacts of DOE's Proposed Action and No-Action Alternative. Under the No-Action Alternative, DOE would not authorize the DCEO to spend Federal funds on the proposed project and DOE assumes, for purposes of the EA, that the Rockford Solar Energy Project would not be constructed or operated without this financial assistance. This approach provides a basis of comparison for the potential impacts of the proposed project.

[1] These include: issuing an environmental finding allowing development of the proposed project; approving a revised airport layout plan; final airspace determination; determining potential obstructions to navigable airspace; issue a finding for Executive Order 12372; and issue a finding for Department of Transportation Order 5650.2.



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The Rockford Solar Energy Project would be developed near Baxter and South Bend Roads on the site of the existing Chicago Rockford International Airport in Rockford, Illinois. The Rockford Solar project would provide up to 20 MW of power. The proposed project would be constructed on land currently used as farmland.

Based on this and other information, DOE concludes that the design, construction, and operation of the Rockford Solar Energy Project would have not impact the following resources: aesthetics and visual resources, noise, Occupational and Public Health and Safety, waste and hazardous materials, or intentional destructive acts. Therefore, these resource areas were briefly analyzed and dismissed from more detailed analysis in the EA.

DOE considered the following resources in more detail as part of its analysis: geology and soils, land use, air quality, water resources, wetlands, biological resources, historic and cultural resources, socioeconomic and environmental justice, transportation, utilities and infrastructure, and floodplain impacts.

With regard to geology and soils, the proposed project would disturb up to 70 acres of land, including the addition of multiple concrete foundations. Current plans for site grading would maintain the existing grade where possible and leave topsoil in place. No fill material would be brought in from offsite. No fill material would be removed from the project site. Erosion and runoff would be managed through the use of best management practices (BMPs) as required by Rockford Solar's NPDES permit. Areas disturbed during construction would be re-vegetated using local non-wildlife attracting native species. Based on the above and the analysis contained in the Final EA, DOE concludes that the project would have a minimal impact on geology and soils at the proposed project location.

With regard to land use, the proposed project would be located within the boundaries of the Chicago Rockford International Airport. The proposed project site is zoned for industrial use but is currently being used for agricultural purposes on airport property. The construction and operation of the proposed project would not change the type of activities/operations performed at other areas of the Chicago Rockford International Airport or other offsite areas. Implementation of the proposed project would permanently commit 70 acres of previously disturbed land. DOE has determined that the proposed project is a compatible use of land for the Chicago Rockford International Airport and would have minimal impacts on properties located outside of the airport.

With regard to air quality, the proposed project would provide approximately 7 million megawatt-hours of renewable energy over the 20-year life of the project that would otherwise be generated by fossil fuels. The impact to air emissions is expected to be negligible. Temporary air emissions would be produced by construction equipment during the construction of the project and fuel delivery trucks. For each of these sources, the impacts to air emissions would be minor or temporary. Therefore, DOE concludes that the proposed project would have temporary adverse impacts to air quality during construction and a minor, but beneficial impact to air quality during operation.

With regard to water resources, the proposed project is not expected to impact groundwater resources. The addition of a small amount of discontinuous impervious surfaces (0.3 acre) in comparison with the total proposed project (70 acres), roughly 0.4 percent of the area would increase the potential for runoff. Based on the above and the analysis contained in the Final EA, DOE has determined there would be no or negligible impacts to groundwater resources and minimal impacts to water infiltrations.

With regard to wetlands, during initial planning for the proposed project, a wetland delineation was completed. The boundaries of the project site were reconfigured to the northeast to avoid any disturbance to wetlands. Rockford Solar will implement best management practices and utilize storm water controls to protect nearby wetlands. Based on the above and the analysis contained in the Final EA, DOE has determined there would be no or negligible impacts to wetlands during construction and operation.

With regards to biological resources, a Threatened and Endangered Species and Habitat Assessment of the proposed project site was conducted. Because native species are present only in limited areas on the site, impacts to surrounding native vegetation is anticipated to be minimal. The site will be enclosed by a 10 foot fence to deter deer and other larger migrating animals. The potential for habitat fragmentation to occur for deer and/or other medium-sized animals is low, as the fenced area can be readily circumnavigated. This displacement is anticipated to have minimal impacts to their populations at large. Trees suitable for the Indiana bat habitat occur within the site boundary. According to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the proposed project is *not likely to adversely* affect the Indiana bat, provided that the suitable Indiana bat roost trees are cleared outside of the maternity season (April 1 through September 30), or after emergence and visual surveys have been conducted. Rockford Solar will follow the guidance of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service during construction of the proposed project. Therefore, DOE has determined that the proposed project will have minimal impacts on biological resources.

With regard to historic and cultural and resources, a Phase I Archaeological Investigation was conducted of the proposed project area. The State provided formal concurrence with the EA's conclusion that the proposed project would not affect any properties listed in, or eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Properties.

With regard to socioeconomic and environmental justice, the project would comply with the Davis-Bacon Act, adhere to "Buy American" provisions, and maximize the use of local construction firms. DOE has determined that no high and/or adverse impacts would occur to any member of the surrounding community, or minority or low-income populations and that the added employment represents a minor, beneficial impact to the local community.

With regard to transportation, utilities and infrastructure, the alternating current output capacity of a 20-megawatt solar power supply can serve approximately 2,200 homes per year. Electrical energy would be delivered to PJM Interconnection LLC, via existing distribution lines. Water required for routine panel washing will be obtained from the City of Rockford. The water usage represents a minimal amount (less than 0.005 percent) of water usage for the City of Rockford. The existing transportation and housing infrastructure in the City of Rockford is adequate to accommodate the demands of the proposed project. The proposed project represents a minimal use of water and would have a small beneficial impact on electricity.

**FLOODPLAIN STATEMENT OF FINDINGS:** The Rockford Solar Energy Project is located in a 100-year floodplain of the Kishwaukee River, and DOE conducted a floodplain assessment as required by regulations at 10 CFR Part 1022, *Compliance with Floodplain and Wetland Environmental Review Requirements*. The project area is located within Chicago Rockford International Airport property. The development of the airport, directly adjacent to the Kishwaukee River, irretrievably altered the land use, resulting in a reduction of the beneficial aspects of the natural floodplain. The project would not alter the depth of floodwaters in the area or otherwise cause any increase of flooding of nearby properties. The

proposed project would also comply with the City's regulations for development within a flood hazard area. DOE concludes that this project would have no adverse impacts on the natural and beneficial floodplain values associated with the base floodplain, would not affect lives or property in the area, and would comply with floodplain protection regulations.

**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE EA PROCESS:** DOE sent scoping letters on July 8, 2010, to Federal, State, and local agencies, Tribal governments, businesses, organizations, special interest groups, and interested individuals, providing 30 days to comment on the scope of the EA.

In response to the scoping letters and notice, DOE received comments from ten agencies. Those comments were from the Illinois Department of Agriculture – Bureau of Land & Water Resources, Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, Rock River Water Reclamation District, Unites States Coast Guard, United States Department of Agriculture – Natural Resources Conservation Service, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, USEPA Region V, and Winnebago County Forest Preserve. The Final EA includes a summary of the comments and DOE's responses. Appendix B of the EA contains a copy of the consultation letters and responses.

DOE issued the Draft EA for comment on September 21, 2011, and posted it on the DOE Golden Field Office Public Reading Room and NEPA websites. DOE sent postcards announcing the availability of the Draft EA to identified stakeholders and published a Notice of Availability on the websites and in the *Rockford Register Star* newspaper. A public hearing was held on October 24, 2011, at the Chicago-Rockford International Airport Auditorium. DOE published the Notice of the Public Hearing on the DOE Golden Field Office Public Reading Room Website and in the *Rockford Register Star* newspaper. The comment period ended on October 31, 2011. DOE received no comments from agencies, organizations, or interested individuals.

**DETERMINATION**: Based on the information presented in the Final EA (DOE/EA-1823), DOE has determined that the Proposed Action would not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment within the context of NEPA. Therefore, the preparation of an environmental impact statement is not required, and DOE is issuing this FONSI.

The Final EA is available at the DOE Golden Field Office Reading Room Website, http://www.eere.energy.gov/golden/Reading_Room.aspx , and the DOE NEPA Website, http://energy.gov/nepa/doe-nepa-documents.

For questions about this FONSI, contact:

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