# BEFORE THE STATE OF WASHINGTON ENERGY FACILITY SITE EVALUATION COUNCIL

In the Matter of the Application of:

DOCKET NO. EF-210011

Scout Clean Energy, LLC, for Horse Heaven Wind Farm, LLC, Applicant

BENTON COUNTY'S PRE-HEARING BRIEF

#### I. <u>INTRODUCTION</u>

Benton County (the "County") respectfully submits this pre-hearing brief in opposition to Scout Clean Energy, LLC's application for site certification for the Horse Heaven Wind Farm. The Horse Heaven Wind Farm cannot meet the criteria for a conditional use permit under the Benton County Code and additionally results in the inappropriate conversion of state-protected agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance. The Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council should recommend denial of the application for site certification to the Governor.

### II. STATEMENT OF FACTS<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> All documents supporting the County's statement of facts can be found on EFSEC's website. <a href="https://www.efsec.wa.gov/energy-facilities/horse-heaven-wind-project">https://www.efsec.wa.gov/energy-facilities/horse-heaven-wind-project</a>

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Scout Clean Energy, LLC ("Scout"), submitted an application for site certification ("ASC") to the Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council ("EFSEC") for a proposed wind and solar energy generation facility to be located along the Horse Heaven Hills in Benton County, Washington, with a nameplate energy generating capacity of up to 1,150 megawatts on February 8, 2021. Scout submitted an updated ASC to EFSEC on December 1, 2022. The Horse Heaven Wind Farm ("HHWF") boundary encompasses approximately 72,428 acres. Within this large lease boundary, the HHWF proposes to install up to either 244 turbines with a height of 499 feet or 150 turbines with a height of 657 feet. In addition, the HHWF proposes to install three solar arrays, with both the wind and solar components storing their energy capacity in three battery energy storage systems. In total, the HHWF will result in the permanent conversion of 6,869 acres of land in the County's Growth Management Act Agricultural District ("GMAAD").

Only a *draft* environmental issue statement ("DEIS") has been issued for the HHWF. As part of its comments on the DEIS, the County noted that there was no discussion in the DEIS on the impact of the HHWF to land designated as agricultural land of long-term commercial significance ("ALLTCS") within the GMAAD. The County filed a Motion to Stay with EFSEC on May 18, 2023, requesting that the adjudication be stayed pending the issuance of the final environmental impact statement ("FEIS") for the HHWF. The County based its motion on both the requirements of the State Environmental Policy Act and the fact that no party, including EFSEC, knows how the FEIS will respond to the County's comments regarding impacts to ALLTCS. Similarly, the County does not know how the layout and specifics of the HHWF may change as a result of all comments received on the DEIS in the FEIS. However, based upon the DEIS, the only mitigation measure proposed for the

conversion of ALLTCS is a restoration plan once the wind turbine and solar infrastructure associated with the HHWF is decommissioned. DEIS, p. 4-269; Updated ASC, Appendix A.

Pre-filed testimony, including direct, rebuttal, and reply testimony, was filed by all parties. A non-consecutive, seven and a half-day-long hearing is scheduled to commence on August 14, 2023, and end on August 25, 2023.

#### III. ARGUMENT

Pursuant to Council Order No. 883 and Pre-Hearing Order No. 2, in order for EFSEC to recommend approval of the HHWF to the Governor, Scout must show that the HHWF complies with Benton County's conditional use permit ("CUP") criteria. Order No. 883, \$\frac{9}{23}\$; Pre-Hearing Order No. 2, p. 2. Scout cannot do so in this case because the size, scope, and scale of the HHWF renders it incompatible with outright permitted uses in the GMAAD and otherwise in conflict with CUP criteria. In addition, EFSEC should recommend denial of the HHWF as it results in the improper conversion of ALLTCS, putting those lands to non-agricultural uses in violation of the mandates of the Growth Management Act ("GMA"), Ch. 36.70A RCW, which results in a violation of the purpose of the GMAAD and therefore the County's zoning requirements.

# A. The Horse Heaven Wind Farm, even with conditions, does not meet Benton County's conditional use permit criteria.

Benton County's CUP criteria are found in the Benton County Code ("BCC") and require that a proposal, as conditioned, meet the following criteria:

- (1) Is compatible with other uses in the surrounding area or is no more incompatible than are other outright permitted uses in the applicable zoning district;
- (2) Will not materially endanger the health, safety, and welfare of the surrounding community to an extent greater than that associated with any other permitted uses in the applicable zoning district;

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- (3) Would not cause the pedestrian and vehicular traffic associated with the use to conflict with existing and anticipated traffic in the neighborhood to an extent greater than that associated with other permitted uses in the applicable zoning district;
- (4) Will be supported by adequate service facilities and would not adversely affect public services to the surrounding area; and
- (5) Would not hinder or discourage the development of permitted uses on neighboring properties in the applicable zoning district as a result of the location, size or height of the buildings, structures, walls, or required fences or screening vegetation to a greater extent than other permitted uses in the applicable zoning district.

BCC 11.50.040(d). These are the same criteria that were in effect when Scout submitted its ASC. ASC, p. 2-152-158. The true key for obtaining a CUP under the BCC is that the applicant, in this case Scout, must show that the HHWF is compatible with other permitted uses in the GMAAD or is no more incompatible than outright permitted uses in the GMAAD. BCC 11.50.050 ("It is the applicant's burden to present sufficient evidence to allow the above conclusions to be made."). EFSEC must understand that neither Benton County nor any other party to the adjudication has to show that the HHWF is incompatible in order for a CUP to be denied. It is Scout's burden to present sufficient evidence to allow the above conclusions to be made. BCC 11.50.040(d). If such evidence is not presented, or all necessary reasonable conditions are not identified by Scout so as to allow EFSEC to make the conclusions required above, the conditional use application shall be denied. *Id.* As detailed in Mr. Wendt's pre-filed testimony, and as Mr. Wendt will testify at hearing, regardless of any conditions that EFSEC may impose on the HHWF, due to grossly disproportionate scale compared to any other permitted uses in the GMMAD, among other fatal flaws, it cannot satisfy Benton County's CUP criteria. BEN EXH 2001 T.

The HHWF will occupy over 100 square miles of the Horse Heaven Hills and permanently extinguish over 10 square miles of protected farmland. No mitigation measures

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or conditions of approval respond to these basic realities. No other use permitted in this zoning district is remotely comparable.

The starting point for any compatibility analysis is comparing the size, scale, and scope of the proposed project with the outright permitted uses in the underlying zoning district. "Compatibility" is the congruent arrangement of land uses and/or project elements to avoid, mitigate, or minimize (to the greatest extent reasonable) conflicts. BCC 11.03.010(53). Crucially, compatibility does not evaluate, and therefore renders irrelevant, the impact of a project on surrounding landowners to maintain their ability to farm or the increase in cost to agricultural uses and practices. Instead, compatibility focuses on the size, scope, and scale of a proposed use in a zone as compared to the permitted uses in a zone.

The permitted uses in the GMAAD are listed *infra*, p. 9-10. Most permitted uses in the GMAAD are agricultural-related and limited to one parcel, with the agricultural activities sometimes encompassing around a thousand or so acres. BEN EXH 2001\_T, p. 7. A typical parcel size in the GMAAD ranges from 150 to 640 acres. *Id.* The HHWF's entire project boundary is 72,742 acres or, assuming the largest typical parcel size, approximately 113 times larger than a typical project in the GMAAD. *Id.* Even just taking the HHWF's wind energy micrositing corridor, which will house all turbines and supporting infrastructure, it encompasses 11,850 acres and is approximately 18 times larger than a typical project in the GMAAD. *Id.* This does not count the solar arrays, which will take up an additional 10,755 acres, which by itself is approximately 16 times larger than a typical project in the GMAAD. The wind energy micrositing corridor and solar arrays combined (22,605 acres) is approximately 35 times larger than a typical project in the GMAAD.

As noted above, the test for compatibility is whether the proposed use is the same or complementary to surrounding uses in the zoning district based upon project scale, traffic impacts, and/or operational impacts and conflicts. When discussing orderly and compatible development, the first step must be to look at the permitted uses in a zone. *Id.*, at p. 10. Permitted uses in a zone are uses that the legislature of the planning jurisdiction, in this case the Benton County Board of County Commissioners (the "Board"), has determined to be orderly and compatible with one another—i.e., a single-family home in a rural area may be compatible with a horse stable as they have similar intensity of use. *Id.* With an unpermitted use, or even a potential conditional use, there is a higher likelihood for conflict in the intensity of uses. *Id.* Conflict in the intensity of uses results in incompatible uses. *Id.* In order to determine the likelihood of conflict, one must compare and contrast the intensity of a proposed conditional use with the intensity of outright permitted uses. *Id.* 

The HHWF micrositing corridor encompasses 11,850 acres and will house 244 turbines. Appendix F to the Updated ASC shows an average parcel size of 341 acres for the landowners with whom Scout holds a lease agreement. Understanding that the lease agreements cover the entire project boundary, the exact number of parcels the micrositing corridor covers is unknown to the County. However, taking this average parcel size of 341 acres, the micrositing corridor can be assumed to cover 35 parcels. 244 turbines across 35 parcels averages out to approximately seven turbines per parcel. This does not include the necessary haul routes associated with each turbine, which may cross multiple parcels.

Dryland farming can encompass thousands of acres and multiple parcels, but usually only has about two or three structures associated with the entire operation. BEN EXH 2001\_T, p. 11.

Permitted uses in the GMAAD are similar, encompassing large areas but including few

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are closer to dirt tracks as compared to the graveled service roads that will be installed for the HHWF. SCE EXH 1035\_R, p. 5. Permitted uses in the GMAAD are low intensity activities when it comes to their use of the land. The intensity of the HHWF is significantly greater than the intensity of permitted uses within the GMAAD, as it covers a much larger land area, involves more ground disturbance, and is not ancillary to existing agricultural uses, rendering the HHWF incompatible with development as compared to permitted uses.

structures and roads. In addition, Scout's own witness admits that the roads in the GMAAD

While Benton County will put on evidence and testimony during the adjudication hearing that the HHWF does not comply with *any* of the required CUP criteria, the key point for EFSEC to understand is that the HHWF is fundamentally incompatible with permitted uses in the GMAAD due to its intensity of use and should not be allowed as a conditional use.

B. The Horse Heaven Wind Farm violates the Growth Management Act's mandate to conserve and protect agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to its inability to satisfy Benton County's CUP criteria, the HHWF suffers from another fatal flaw—it impacts and unlawfully converts ALLTCS in violation of the GMA. One of the issues for adjudication under the regulations implementing the Energy Facility Site Locations Act (Ch. 80.50 RCW) is a proposal's consistency with zoning and land use regulations. WAC 463-30-300(2). The HHWF is located within Benton County's GMAAD. The purpose of the GMAAD:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The County acknowledges that Pre-Hearing Order No. 2 excluded from adjudication the issue of compliance with the Growth Management Act. However, the County's position is that non-compliance with the GMA has a substantial relationship to EFSEC's evaluation of

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[i]s to meet the minimum requirements of the State Growth Management Act (Chapter 36.70A RCW) that mandates the designation and protection of agricultural lands of long term commercial significance. This chapter protects the GMA Agricultural District (GMAAD) and the activities therein by limiting non-agricultural uses in the district to those compatible with agriculture and by establishing minimum lot sizes in areas where soils, water, and climate are suitable for agriculture purposes. This chapter is intended to work in conjunction with Chapter 14.05 BCC entitled "Right to Farm" which protects normal agricultural activities from nuisance complaints.

BCC 11.17.010 (emphasis added). Therefore, in order for the HHWF to be consistent with the requirements of the GMAAD, it must also be consistent with the requirements of the GMA.

The GMA requires conservation of agricultural lands of long-term 1. commercial significance ("ALLTCS").

The GMA imposes on cities and counties a mandate for conservation of a type of natural resource land identified by the GMA as ALLTCS. RCW 36.70A.060. Jurisdictions are required "(1) to designate agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance; (2) to assure the conservation of agricultural land; (3) to assure that the use of adjacent lands does not interfere with their continued use for agricultural purposes; (4) to conserve agricultural land in order to maintain and enhance the agricultural industry; and (5) to discourage incompatible uses." King Cnty. v. Cent. Puget Sound Growth Mgmt. Hearings Bd., 142 Wn.2d 543, 558 (2000) (Soccer Fields).

The conservation of ALLTCS is a mandate that *must* be followed. *See Yakima Cnty*. v. E. Wash. Growth Mgmt. Hearings Bd., 146 Wn. App 679, 687 (2008) ("The legislature has been particularly concerned with agricultural lands when addressing the problem of growth

the issue of land use as the HHWF is located on land zoned GMAAD, which was enacted to meet the minimum requirements of the GMA.

management. Read together, RCW 36.70A.020(8), .060(1), and .170, reveal a legislative mandate for the conservation of agricultural land.") (internal citation omitted). Once land is designated as ALLTCS, it cannot either be de-designated or put to non-agricultural uses without the local jurisdiction first making a determination that the lands no longer meet ALLTCS status. *Clark Cnty. v. W. Wash. Growth Mgmt. Hearings Bd.*, 161 Wn. App. 204 (2011), *vacated in part on other grounds*, 177 Wn.2d 136 (2013).

The GMA's design is "to maintain and enhance the agricultural industry by assuring the conservation of agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance, and preventing interference with agricultural activities by nearby non-agricultural land uses." *Soccer Fields*, 142 Wn.2d at 554. EFSEC must "give effect to the Legislature's stated intent to *conserve* such land in order to *maintain* and *enhance* the agricultural industry." *Id.*, at 559. The fact that the HHWF proposes to convert the land back to agricultural uses once the HHWF's life is complete is both unsupported by the record and, more importantly, is irrelevant. Case law in Washington suggests that *any* conversion of ALLTCS is improper because it is presumptively irreversible. *See Id.*, at 562 (argument that land could be returned to agricultural use was unpersuasive to find that zoning complied with GMA requirements in regard to ALLTCS); *Lewis Cnty. v. W. Wash. Growth Mgmt. Hearings Bd.*, 157 Wn.2d 488, 508 (2006) (noting that *Soccer Fields* court "concluded that the soccer field zoning was noncompliant because 'it would result in a long-term removal' of agricultural land from agricultural production, possibly never returning to agricultural use.").

2. The HHWF will result in the improper and illegal conversion of agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance.

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In order to fulfill the GMA's mandate to protect ALLTCS, Benton County enacted the GMAAD. BCC 11.17.010. Permitted activities within the GMAAD are limited to agricultural uses and non-agricultural uses "which are dependent upon, supportive of, ancillary to, or compatible with, agricultural production as the principal land use." *Id.* These permitted activities include: agricultural activities; agricultural-related industries; agricultural stands; bakeries associated with agriculture; single-family homes; manufactured homes; commercial specialty/exotic animal raising; aquaculture; adult family homes; club houses, grange halls associated with agriculture; custom agricultural services; personal airstrips; public or quasi-public buildings; schools/churches; dog kennels; cell towers (no greater in height than 150'); personal use wind turbines (no greater in height than 60'); meteorological towers; and commercial horse stables.

The HHWF will encompass a total lease boundary of 72,428 acres within the GMAAD. All land within the GMAAD is ALLTCS. BEN EXH 2002, p. 54. Therefore, without a de-designation of the land, the GMA prohibits activities within the GMAAD that result in the conversion of ALLTCS. It is undisputed that within the project boundary, the HHWF will result in the permanent conversion of 6,869 acres—over 10 square miles—of ALLTCS. Updated ASC, p. 2-6. This is not supposition by the County because it is plainly acknowledged in the DEIS.

Loss of agricultural productivity would persist throughout the life of the Project and would not be restored when construction is complete (WDFW 2009). Permanent disturbance from Project construction (which extends into operation and decommissioning) would occur in the areas of the final tower footings and associated access roads, the substations, fencing around the solar arrays, and all areas occupied by permanent structures. Permanent disturbance also includes areas identified by the Applicant as modified habitat, which includes areas within the fencing around solar arrays. The areas under and between solar arrays would be disturbed

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during Project construction and would be replanted following construction; however, areas under the solar arrays would not support agricultural activities.

DEIS, p. 4-261. There has been no de-designation of any of the land within the HHWF lease boundary. Therefore, any place where infrastructure is placed or roads are constructed within the HHWF project boundary converts ALLTCS. This is unlawful under the GMA and the BCC.

Scout seems to suggest that the County is opposed to the HHWF because the County wants to use the Horse Heaven Hills as an area to expand the rapidly growing Tri-Cities. SCE EXH 1035 R, p. 13 ("This sleight-of-hand technique used by the County to scapegoat Scout Clean Energy is a thin veil that poorly hides the County's true long-term plans for the Horse Heaven Hills and its farms."). First, the suggestion is completely wrong. In order to allow for residential development in the GMAAD, the County would first have to conduct a comprehensive land use analysis to determine if the necessary factors are present for dedesignation of ALLTCS. Clark Cnty, 177 Wn.2d 136. The County undertook this kind of analysis during its 2018 comprehensive plan update. BEN EXH 2002, p. 956-980. The County does not expect to be able to de-designate any more ALLTCS in the Horse Heaven Hills area pursuant to the factors in WAC 365-190-050. Additionally, if the County did dedesignate ALLTCS, its concern about the *improper conversion* of ALLTCS would be moot. The land would no longer be ALLTCS and could be put to any number of non-agricultural uses. Second, Scout's suggestion continues to showcase that Scout either misunderstands the County's argument, or simply does not care about the County's attempt to conserve ALLTCS.

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Benton County acknowledges that, at the time of Scout's application, "wind turbine farms" were authorized pursuant to a CUP in the GMAAD. However, the definition of a wind turbine farm was simply "two or more wind turbines on one parcel." BCC 11.03.010(191). From a base definitional level, any number of projects could be submitted to the County for a "wind turbine farm." In this case, Scout proposes a project boundary of 72,428 acres, with 244 wind turbines to be constructed across an 11,850-acre micrositing corridor. Updated ASC, p. 2-1.

Understanding that the ambiguity as to potential proposals for a "wind turbine farm," some of which may conflict with the agricultural conservation mandate of the GMA and GMAAD, the Board updated the conditional uses allowed in the GMAAD in 2022, removing "wind turbine farms." BEN EXH 2001\_T, p. 8. In interpreting a statute, a court is to look to the legislative history of a statute, which includes amendments. *State v. Kingen*, 39 Wn. App. 124, 129 (1984). While Benton County's comprehensive plan was updated after Scout submitted its ASC, EFSEC should still take into consideration the Board's amendments as a statement of its views on compatible uses in the GMAAD. The legislative history in this case shows that the Board intended to provide for uses that are compatible and ancillary with the other permitted uses in the GMAAD, such as one or two 60-foot wind turbines for personal use on a farm. This is because a massive wind turbine farm the size and scale of the HHWF results in the improper conversion of ALLTCS to non-agricultural uses.

a. The HHWF's decommissioning plan is not sufficient mitigation.

As a matter of substantive law, the fact that land may, in the future, be returned to its "preconstruction character" does not comply with the GMA's mandate that ALLTCS be preserved. *Soccer Fields*, 142 Wn.2d at 562 ("The County's argument that the land could be

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returned to agricultural use at a future time, despite the intensive use demanded by the growing urban population and the profitability of that use, is unpersuasive."). Benton County's concerns regarding HHWF's conversion of ALLTCS is due to the fact that "once gone, the capacity of those lands to produce food is likely gone forever." Lewis Cnty. v. W. Wash. Growth Mgmt. Hearings Bd., 157 Wn.2d 488, 496 (2006) (emphasis added).

Simply put, Benton County does not agree with Scout that its decommissioning plan provides sufficient support for the proposition that the converted ALLTCS can be returned to viable agricultural production. Scout does not provide any evidence to back up such claims, which in any event are at odds with previous decisions of the Washington State Supreme Court. *See Lewis Cnty.*, 157 Wn.2d at 496; *Soccer Fields*, 142 Wn.2d at 562.

b. The HHWF will result in improper agricultural fragmentation.

In addition to conversion of ALLTCS, the HHWF will also result in agricultural fragmentation within the GMAAD. Dryland farming has an economy of scale requiring large operations, typically in the thousands of acres. This is due to the fact that dryland farming has low per-acre yield and profits. By fragmenting farming operations within and beyond the HHWF area, the County will experience pressure to allow non-agriculture rural uses to replace an intact, regional agricultural area. The disruptive effect of the HHWF on farming operations will be apt to result in the transition of this land to other uses that will have little or nothing to do with agriculture. Road building, traffic, and new land use pressures will range beyond the HHWF area and will cause large-scale change to the landscape as a viable farming area. Simply put, the HHWF will result in the conversion of ALLTCS and future fragmentation of the land within the GMAAD.

#### IV. <u>CONCLUSION</u>

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Due to the size, scale, and scope of the HHWF, it is incompatible with outright permitted uses in the GMAAD and cannot satisfy Benton County's CUP criteria.

Additionally, the HHWF will result in the improper conversion of ALLTCS and cause agricultural fragmentation within the GMAAD. EFSEC should recommend denial of the HHWF to the Governor.

DATED this 9<sup>th</sup> day of August, 2023.

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#### /s/ Kenneth W. Harper

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## CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I certify under penalty of perjury under the laws of the State of Washington that I served, in the manner indicated below, a true and correct copy of the foregoing document as follows:

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