

## **Backgrounder**

### **Wind Energy Projects Environmental Assessment Issue**

*(BC Nature – Background Information for Letters of Support)*



### **Issue Summary**

The Province of British Columbia has introduced new legislation and regulatory pathways to accelerate renewable energy development, including wind power, while increasing Indigenous participation and decision-making in project development. Under the Renewable Energy Projects (Streamlined Permitting) Act, certain projects may proceed through streamlined or alternative review processes rather than the standard environmental assessment (EA) required under the Environmental Assessment Act.

These changes reflect important efforts to advance climate action and align with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), including recognition of Indigenous rights, title, and participation in resource development.

At the same time, concerns have been raised within the conservation community regarding whether streamlined or alternative assessment pathways consistently provide the same level of ecological review, transparency, and cumulative effects analysis as traditional environmental assessments particularly in projects involving sensitive or underrepresented ecosystems.



BC Nature's interest in this issue is centered on ensuring that all development pathways regardless of proponent or governance structure maintain robust, science-based environmental oversight and adequately protect species at risk and critical habitats.

### **Species at Risk Context**

- **Status:** Multiple species potentially affected, including birds, bats, and ungulates
- **Species:** Migratory birds, bats, and large mammals such as Bighorn Sheep
- **Habitat:** Grasslands, shrub-steppe ecosystems, and open pine forests
- **Primary Threats:** Habitat loss, fragmentation, collision risk (birds and bats), disturbance from construction and infrastructure
- **Significance of Area:** Many proposed wind energy sites overlap with rare and under protected ecosystems that support species at risk

Wind turbines are known to pose risks to wildlife, particularly:

- Bird and bat mortality from turbine strikes
- Habitat displacement and avoidance behavior
- Fragmentation from roads, transmission lines, and infrastructure

### **Geographic Context**

- **Location:** Interior regions of British Columbia, often in high-wind areas
- **Ecosystem:** Dry interior grasslands, shrub-steppe, and open forest ecosystems
- **Habitat:** Some of the most endangered ecosystems in the province
- **Protection Gap:** These ecosystems are significantly underrepresented in protected areas and are already under pressure from development, agriculture, and climate change

These landscapes are among the most at-risk ecosystems in BC, with limited intact habitat remaining. Development in these areas can result in disproportionate ecological impacts.

### **Cultural Context (First Peoples Impact)**

First Nations are increasingly involved as partners, proponents, or rights-holders in renewable energy projects. This reflects efforts by the Province to align with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), including recognition of Indigenous rights, title, and decision-making authority.



Some projects may incorporate Indigenous knowledge and stewardship practices. However, there is variability in how environmental review processes are applied, and not all Indigenous-led or partnered projects undergo the same level of publicly accessible assessment as traditional EAs.

This creates a complex policy space where reconciliation, economic development, and environmental protection must be carefully balanced.

### **Ecological Context**

Wind energy development, while critical for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, is not without environmental impact. Key concerns include:

- Loss and fragmentation of critical habitat
- Disturbance to wildlife movement and breeding patterns
- Cumulative impacts when multiple projects occur within the same region
- Limited baseline data in some proposed development areas

Without comprehensive environmental assessments, there is concern that these impacts may not be fully understood or mitigated prior to project approval.

### **Conservation Significance**

The issue highlights a growing tension between:

- Climate action (rapid expansion of renewable energy)
- Indigenous rights and economic participation
- Biodiversity conservation and habitat protection

For conservation organizations, the central concern is whether streamlined regulatory processes provide sufficient safeguards to protect species at risk and sensitive ecosystems.

Particularly at risk are:

- Rare grassland ecosystems
- Migratory bird pathways
- Critical habitats that are already underrepresented in protected areas

### **Scientific Context:**

Environmental assessments traditionally provide:



- Baseline ecological data
- Species-at-risk surveys
- Cumulative effects analysis
- Mitigation and monitoring requirements

Alternative or streamlined processes may:

- Rely on more limited data
- Reduce opportunities for independent scientific review
- Limit transparency and public engagement

This raises questions about whether current approaches adequately address long-term ecological impacts, especially in areas with high conservation value.

### **Key Considerations / Gaps**

- Lack of clarity on which projects are exempt vs. reviewed
- Limited transparency in alternative assessment processes
- Uncertainty around cumulative effects analysis
- Potential inconsistency in species-at-risk protections
- Insufficient publicly available data for decision-making

### **References**

- Renewable Energy Projects (Streamlined Permitting) Act: <https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/25012>
- Environmental Assessment Act: [https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/93\\_2025](https://www.bclaws.gov.bc.ca/civix/document/id/complete/statreg/93_2025)
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)
- BC Government Release: <https://news.gov.bc.ca/releases/2025ECS0018-000397>
- BC Energy Regulator – Renewal Energy Framework: <https://www.bc-er.ca/energy-professionals/application-documentation/renewables>
- Permitting Reform for Renewable Energy Projects: <https://stikeman.com/en-ca/kh/canadian-energy-law/permitting-reform-for-renewable-energy-projects>
- BC Government Streamlines Renewable Energy Regulatory Process and Announces 2025 Call for Power: <https://www.bennettjones.com/Insights/Blogs/BC-Government-Streamlines-Renewable-Energy-Regulatory-Process-and-Announces-2025-Call-for-Power>
- ‘At what cost?’: wind energy projects now exempt from environmental assessments in B.C.: <https://thenarwhal.ca/wind-energy-exempt-environmental-assessment/>