Wetland Baseline & Risk Assessment for the proposed Jersey Solar Power Plant Project

Ventersdorp, North West Province, South Africa

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CLIENT

ENVIRONAMICS

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The Biodiversity Company was appointed to undertake a wetland baseline and risk assessment for the proposed Jersey Solar Power Plant (SPP) and infrastructure project. The proposed project involves the development of a solar facility, located near Ventersdorp and in the North West Province (Figure 1-1). The Project Area of Influence (PAOI) is approximately 1 270 ha in size and the assessment and survey were conducted within this area.

The approach was informed by the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations. 2014 (GNR 326, 7 April 2017) of the National Environmental Management Act, 1998 (Act No. 107 of 1998) (NEMA). The approach has taken cognisance of the recently published Government Notices 320 (20 March 2020) in terms of NEMA, dated 20 March: "*Procedures for the Assessment and Minimum Criteria for Reporting on Identified Environmental Themes in terms of Sections 24(5)(a) and (h) and 44 of the National Environmental Management Act, 1998, when applying for Environmental Authorisation*" (Reporting Criteria).

This assessment has been completed in accordance with the requirements of the published General Notice (GN) 509 by the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS). This notice was published in the Government Gazette (no. 40229) under Section 39 of the National Water Act (Act no. 36 of 1998) in August 2016, for a Water Use Licence (WUL) in terms of Section 21(c) & (i) water uses. The GN 509 process provides an allowance to apply for a WUL for Section 21(c) & (i) under a General Authorisation (GA), as opposed to a full Water Use Licence Application (WULA). A water use (or potential) qualifies for a GA under GN 509 when the proposed water use/activity is subjected to analysis using the DWS Risk Assessment Matrix (RAM). This assessment will implement the RAM and provide a specialist opinion on the appropriate water use authorisation.

This report, after taking into consideration the findings and recommendations provided by the specialist herein, should inform and guide the Environmental Assessment Practitioner (EAP) and regulatory authorities, enabling informed decision making, as to the aquatic ecological viability of the proposed project.

1.2 Site Information and Technical Details

The following information (Table 1-1) is as per the technical information provided by Environamics:

Table 1-1 Site information

Description of affected farm portion	Solar Power Plant Portion 1 of the Farm Illmasdale No. 70 Portion 2 of the Farm Illmasdale No. 70
Province	North West
District Municipality	Dr Kenneth Kaunda District Municipality
Local Municipality	JB Marks Local Municipality
Ward numbers	31
Closest towns	Ventersdorp is located approximately 27km southwest of the proposed development.
21 Digit Surveyor General codes	Solar Power Plant Portion 2 of the Farm Illmasdale No. 70 T0IQ00000000007000001 Portion 2 of the Farm Illmasdale No. 70 T0IQ00000000007000002

	Power Line Remainder of the farm Illmasdale No. 70 T0IQ00000000007000001 T0IQ00000000007000002
Type of technology	Photovoltaic solar facility
Structure Height	Panels ~6m, buildings ~ 6m, power line ~32m and battery storage facility ~8m height
Battery storage	Within a 4-hectare area
Surface area to be covered (Development footprint)	Approximately 600 ha
Laydown area dimensions (EIA footprint)	Assessed 600 ha
Structure orientation	The panels will either be fixed to a single-axis horizontal tracking structure where the orientation of the panel varies according to the time of the day, as the sun moves from east to west or tilted at a fixed angle equivalent to the latitude at which the site is located in order to capture the most sun.
Generation capacity	Up to 350 MW
Expected production	415 MW

The term photovoltaic describes a solid-state electronic cell that produces direct current electrical energy from the radiant energy of the sun through a process known as the Photovoltaic Effect. This refers to light energy placing electrons into a higher state of energy to create electricity. Each PV cell is made of silicon (i.e. semiconductors), which is positively and negatively charged on either side, with electrical conductors attached to both sides to form a circuit. This circuit captures the released electrons in the form of an electric current (direct current). The key components of the proposed project are described below:

- PV Panel Array - To produce up to 350MW, the proposed facility will require numerous linked cells placed behind a protective glass sheet to form a panel. Multiple panels will be required to form the solar PV arrays which will comprise the PV facility. The PV panels will be tilted at a northern angle in order to capture the most sun or using one-axis tracker structures to follow the sun to increase the Yield.

- Wiring to Inverters - Sections of the PV array will be wired to inverters. The inverter is a pulse width mode inverter that converts direct current (DC) electricity to alternating current (AC) electricity at grid frequency.

- Connection to the grid - Connecting the array to the electrical grid requires transformation of the voltage from 480V to 33KV to 132KV to 275KV. The normal components and dimensions of a distribution rated electrical substation will be required. Output voltage from the inverter is 480V and this is fed into step up transformers to 132kV. An onsite substation will be required on the site to step the voltage up to 132kV, after which the power will be evacuated into the national grid via the proposed power line. It is expected that generation from the facility will tie in with the Hera / Watershed 275kV HV Feeder Overhead Line to the existing Eskom Pluto 400kV/275KV/22KV MTS Substation. The connection options will be assessed within the same 200m wide (up to 550m wide in some instances) grid connection corridor. The Jersey SPP will inject up to 350MW into the National Grid. The installed capacity will be approximately 415MW (Refer to Figure 1-1).

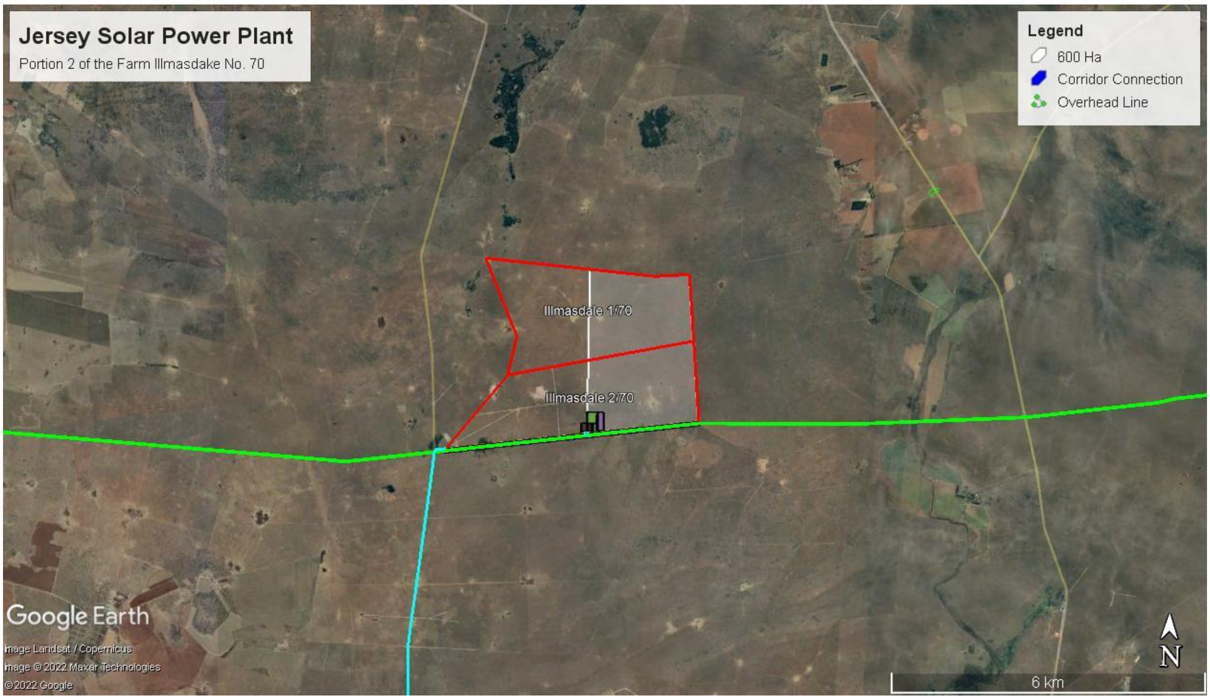

Figure 1-1 Map illustrating the proposed site

- Electrical reticulation network – An internal electrical reticulation network will be required and will be lain ~2-4 m underground as far as practically possible.
- Supporting Infrastructure – The supporting infrastructure such as the auxiliary buildings will be situated in an area measuring up to 4 ha.
- Battery storage – A Battery Storage Facility with a maximum height of 8 m and a maximum volume of 1,740 m^3 of batteries and associated operational, safety and control infrastructure.
- Roads – Access to the facility will be obtained from the N14 to the south of the site and via another unnamed road to the north of the site. An internal site road network will also be required to provide access to the solar field and associated infrastructure. The access and internal roads will be constructed within a 25- meter corridor. Access Points: coordinates 26°17'27.04"S; 27° 3'0.28"E and 26°10'23.40"S; 27° 2'51.09"E.
- Fencing – For health, safety and security reasons, the facility will be required to be fenced off from the surrounding farm. Fencing with a height of 2.5 meters will be used.

1.3 Consideration of Alternatives

The DEAT 2006 guidelines on 'assessment of alternatives and impacts' proposes the consideration of four types of alternatives namely, the no-go, location, activity, and design alternatives. It is however, important to note that the regulation and guidelines specifically state that only 'feasible' and 'reasonable' alternatives should be explored. It also recognizes that the consideration of alternatives is an iterative process of feedback between the developer and EAP, which in some instances culminates in a single preferred project proposal. An initial site assessment was conducted by the developer the affected properties and the farm portions were found favorable due to its proximity to grid connections, solar radiation, ecology and relative flat terrain. These factors were then taken into consideration and avoided as far as possible.

The following alternatives were considered in relation to the proposed activity and all specialists should also make mention of these:

No-go alternative

This alternative considers the option of 'do nothing' and maintaining the status quo. The site is currently zoned for agricultural and mining land uses. Should the proposed activity not proceed, the site will remain unchanged and will continue to be used for agricultural purposes. The potential opportunity costs in terms of alternative land use income through rental for energy facility and the supporting social and economic development in the area would be lost if the status quo persist.

Location alternatives

No other possible sites were identified on Portion 2 of the Farm Illmasdale No. 70. This site is referred to as the preferred site. Some limited sensitive features occur on the site. The size of the site makes provision for the exclusion of any sensitive environmental features that may arise through the EIA proses.

Technical alternatives: Powerlines

Two connection options are available. It is expected that generation from the facility will connect to the national grid via the existing Eskom Hera/Watershed 275kV or Pluto/Watershed 275kV Overhead Line. The grid connection route will be assessed within a 200m wide (up to 550m wide in some instances) corridor. The Project will inject up to 350MW into the National Grid. The installed capacity will be approximately 415MW.

Battery storage facility

It is proposed that a nominal up to 500 MWh Battery Storage Facility for grid storage would be housed in stacked containers, or multi-storey building, with a maximum height of 8m and a maximum volume of 1,740m^3 of batteries and associated operational, safety and control infrastructure. Three types of battery technologies are being considered for the proposed project: Lithium-ion, Sodium-sulphur or Vanadium Redox flow battery. The preferred battery technology is Lithium-ion.

Battery storage offers a wide range of advantages to South Africa including renewable energy time shift, renewable capacity firming, electricity supply reliability and quality improvement, voltage regulation, electricity reserve capacity improvement, transmission congestion relief, load following and time of use energy cost management. In essence, this technology allows renewable energy to enter the base load and peak power generation market and therefore can compete directly with fossil fuel sources of power generation and offer a truly sustainable electricity supply option.

Design and layout alternatives

Design alternatives will be considered throughout the planning and design phase and specialist studies are expected to inform the final layout of the proposed development.

Technology alternatives

There are several types of semiconductor technologies currently available and in use for PV solar panels. Two, however, have become the most widely adopted, namely crystalline silicon (Mono-facial and Bi-facial) and thin film. The technology that (at this stage) proves more feasible and reasonable with respect to the proposed solar facility is crystalline silicon panels, due to it being non-reflective, more efficient, and with a higher durability. However, due to the rapid technological advances being made in the field of solar technology the exact type of technology to be used, such as bifacial panels, will only be confirmed at the onset of the project.

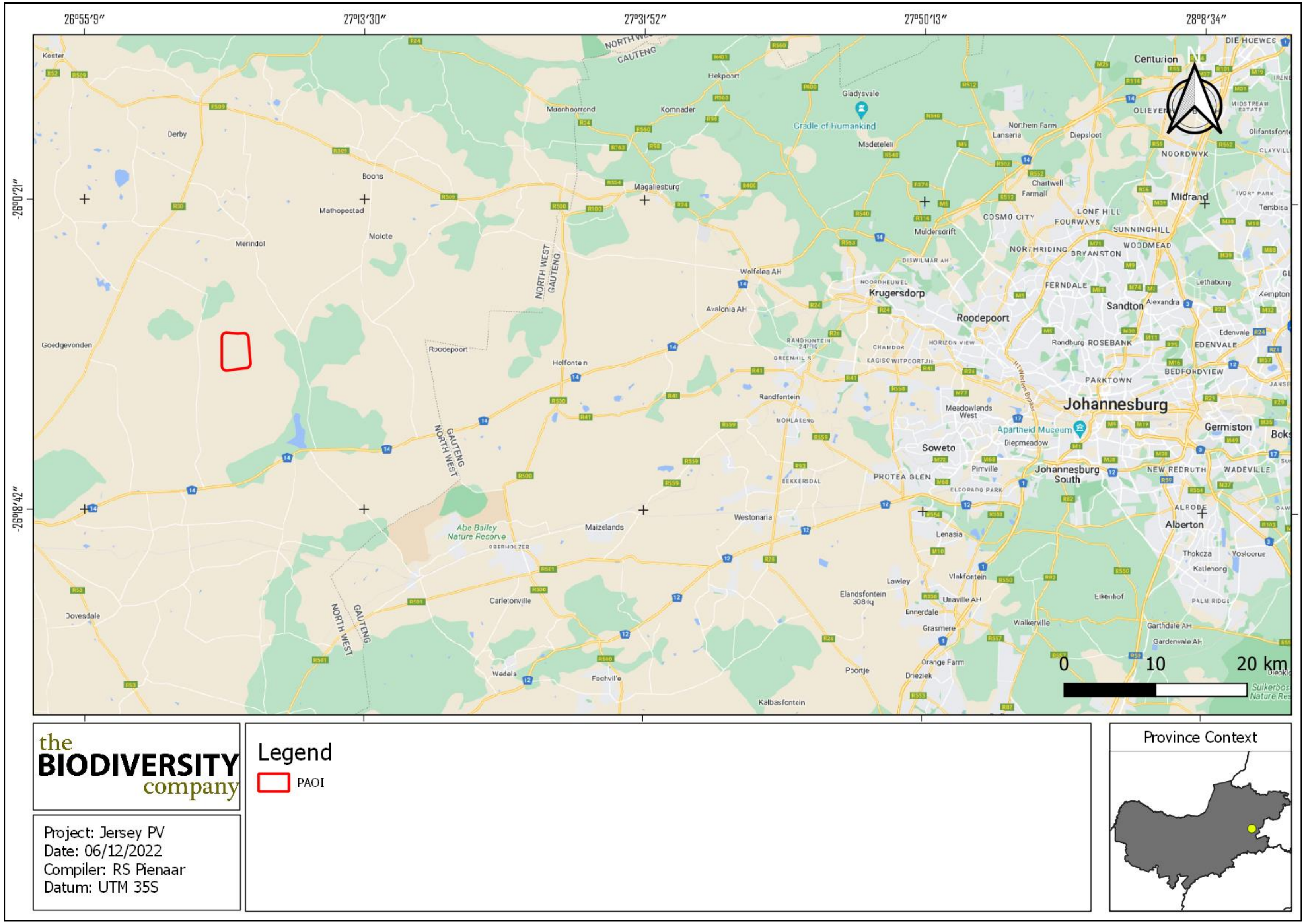

Figure 1-2 Map illustrating the regional context of the PAOI

1.4 Specialist Details

Report Name	**Wetland Baseline & Risk Assessment for the Proposed Jersey Solar Power Plant Project**	
Reference	**Jersey SPP**	
Submitted to	ENVIRONAMICS	
Report Writer & Fieldwork	**Rian Pienaar**	
	Rian Pienaar is an aquatic ecologist (Cand. Sci. Nat. 135544) with experience in wetland identification and delineations. Rian completed his M.Sc. in environmental science at the North-West University Potchefstroom Campus. Rian has been part of wetland studies for road and culvert upgrades, power station and dam construction.	
Reviewer	**Andrew Husted**	
	Andrew Husted is Pr Sci Nat registered (400213/11) in the following fields of practice: Ecological Science, Environmental Science and Aquatic Science. Andrew is an Aquatic, Wetland and Biodiversity Specialist with more than 13 years' experience in the environmental consulting field.	
Declaration	The Biodiversity Company and its associates operate as independent consultants under the auspice of the South African Council for Natural Scientific Professions. We declare that we have no affiliation with or vested financial interests in the proponent, other than for work performed under the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations, 2017. We have no conflicting interests in the undertaking of this activity and have no interests in secondary developments resulting from the authorisation of this project. We have no vested interest in the project, other than to provide a professional service within the constraints of the project (timing, time and budget) based on the principals of science.	

1.5 Terms of Reference

The following tasks were completed in fulfilment of the terms of reference for this assessment:

- The delineation, classification and assessment of wetlands within 500 m of the project area;
- Conduct risk assessments relevant to the proposed activity;
- Recommendations relevant to associated impacts; and
- Report compilation detailing the baseline findings.

1.6 Key Legislative Requirements

1.6.1 National Water Act (NWA, 1998)

The DWS is the custodian of South Africa's water resources and therefore assumes public trusteeship of water resources, which includes watercourses, surface water, estuaries, or aquifers. The National Water Act (Act No. 36 of 1998) (NWA) allows for the protection of water resources, which includes:

- The maintenance of the quality of the water resource to the extent that the water resources may be used in an ecologically sustainable way;
- The prevention of the degradation of the water resource; and
- The rehabilitation of the water resource.

A watercourse means;

- A river or spring;
- A natural channel in which water flows regularly or intermittently;

- A wetland, lake or dam into which, or from which, water flows; and
- Any collection of water which the Minister may, by notice in the Gazette, declare to be a watercourse, and a reference to a watercourse includes, where relevant, its bed and banks.

The NWA recognises that the entire ecosystem and not just the water itself, and any given water resource constitutes the resource and as such needs to be conserved. No activity may therefore take place within a watercourse unless it is authorised by the DWS. Any area within a wetland or riparian zone is therefore excluded from development unless authorisation is obtained from the DWS in terms of Section 21 (c) and (i).

1.6.2 National Environmental Management Act (NEMA, 1998)

The National Environmental Management Act (NEMA) (Act 107 of 1998) and the associated Regulations as amended in April 2017, states that prior to any development taking place within a wetland or riparian area, an environmental authorisation process needs to be followed. This could follow either the Basic Assessment Report (BAR) process or the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process depending on the scale of the impact.

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2 Methods

A single wetland site visit was conducted on the 5th of October 2022, this would constitute a dry season survey.

2.1 Identification and Mapping

The wetland areas were delineated in accordance with the DWAF (2005) guidelines, a cross section is presented in Figure 2-1. The outer edges of the wetland areas were identified by considering the following four specific indicators:

- The Terrain Unit Indicator helps to identify those parts of the landscape where wetlands are more likely to occur;
- The Soil Form Indicator identifies the soil forms, as defined by the Soil Classification Working Group (1991), which are associated with prolonged and frequent saturation.
  - The soil forms (types of soil) found in the landscape were identified using the South African soil classification system namely; Soil Classification: A Taxonomic System for South Africa (Soil Classification Working Group, 1991);
- The Soil Wetness Indicator identifies the morphological "signatures" developed in the soil profile as a result of prolonged and frequent saturation; and
- The Vegetation Indicator identifies hydrophilic vegetation associated with frequently saturated soils.

Vegetation is used as the primary wetland indicator. However, in practise the soil wetness indicator tends to be the most important, and the other three indicators are used in a confirmatory role.

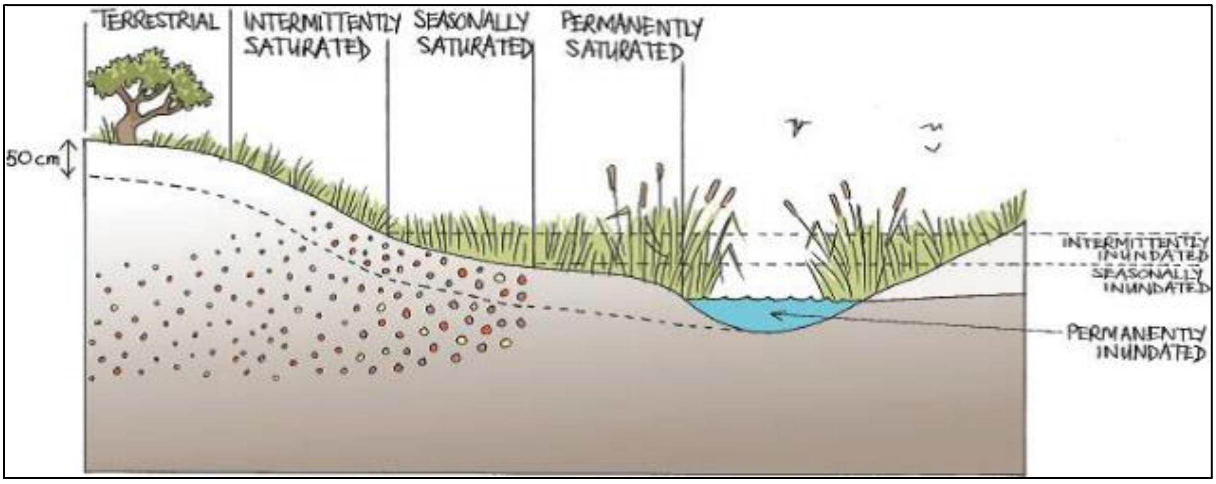

Figure 2-1 Cross section through a wetland, indicating how the soil wetness and vegetation indicators change (Ollis et al. 2013)

2.2 Delineation

The wetland indicators described above are used to determine the boundaries of the wetlands within the project area. These delineations are then illustrated by means of maps accompanied by descriptions.

2.3 Functional Assessment

Wetland Functionality refers to the ability of wetlands to provide healthy conditions for the wide variety of organisms found in wetlands as well as humans. Eco Services serves as the main factor contributing to wetland functionality.

The assessment of the ecosystem services supplied by the identified wetlands was conducted per the guidelines as described in WET-EcoServices (Kotze *et al*. 2008). An assessment was undertaken that examines and rates the following services according to their degree of importance and the degree to which the services are provided (Table 2-1).

Table 2-1 Classes for determining the likely extent to which a benefit is being supplied

Score	Rating of likely extent to which a benefit is being supplied
< 0.5	Low
0.6 - 1.2	Moderately Low
1.3 - 2.0	Intermediate
2.1 - 3.0	Moderately High
> 3.0	High

2.4 Present Ecological Status

The overall approach is to quantify the impacts of human activity or clearly visible impacts on wetland health, and then to convert the impact scores to a Present Ecological Status (PES) score. This takes the form of assessing the spatial extent of impact of individual activities/occurrences and then separately assessing the intensity of impact of each activity in the affected area. The extent and intensity are then combined to determine an overall magnitude of impact. The Present State categories are provided in Table 2-2.

Table 2-2 The Present Ecological Status categories (Macfarlane, et al., 2008)

Impact Category	Description	Impact Score Range	PES
None	Unmodified, natural	0 to 0.9	A
Small	Largely Natural with few modifications. A slight change in ecosystem processes is discernible and a small loss of natural habitats and biota may have taken place.	1.0 to 1.9	B
Moderate	Moderately Modified. A moderate change in ecosystem processes and loss of natural habitats has taken place, but the natural habitat remains predominantly intact.	2.0 to 3.9	C
Large	Largely Modified. A large change in ecosystem processes and loss of natural habitat and biota has occurred.	4.0 to 5.9	D
Serious	Seriously Modified. The change in ecosystem processes and loss of natural habitat and biota is great, but some remaining natural habitat features are still recognizable.	6.0 to 7.9	E
Critical	Critical Modification. The modifications have reached a critical level and the ecosystem processes have been modified completely with an almost complete loss of natural habitat and biota.	8.0 to 10	F

2.5 Importance and Sensitivity

The importance and sensitivity of water resources are determined to establish resources that provide higher than average ecosystem services, biodiversity support functions or are particularly sensitive to impacts. The mean of the determinants is used to assign the Importance and Sensitivity (IS) category as listed in Table 2-3.

Table 2-3 Description of Importance and Sensitivity categories

IS Category	Range of Mean	Recommended Ecological Management Class
Very High	3.1 to 4.0	**A**
High	2.1 to 3.0	**B**
Moderate	1.1 to 2.0	**C**
Low Marginal	< 1.0	**D**

2.6 Ecological Classification and Description

The National Wetland Classification Systems (NWCS) developed by the South African National Biodiversity Institute (SANBI) will be considered for this study. This system comprises a hierarchical classification process of defining a wetland based on the principles of the hydrogeomorphic (HGM) approach at higher levels, and then also includes structural features at the lower levels of classification (Ollis *et al.,* 2013).

2.7 Buffer Requirements

The "Preliminary Guideline for the Determination of Buffer Zones for Rivers, Wetlands and Estuaries" (Macfarlane *et al.,* 2014) was used to determine the appropriate buffer zone for the proposed activity.

2.8 Assumptions and Limitations

The following assumptions and limitations are applicable for this assessment:

- The focus area was based on the spatial files provided by the client and any alterations to the area and/or missing GIS information would have affected the area surveyed;
- Only the outline area of the proposed site was provided to the specialist; and
- No natural wet areas / wetlands have been found within the project area of influence and thus no functional or risk assessment has been conducted for the project.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Desktop Baseline

3.1.1 Project Area

The proposed solar project is located approximately 27 km northeast of Ventersdorp in the North West province and approximately 49 km southwest of Boons. The project area is situated in the C23F quaternary catchment within the Vaal Water Management Area (WMA) (see Figure 1-2).

3.1.2 Vegetation Type

The PAOI is situated within the grassland biome. This biome is centrally located in southern Africa, and adjoins all except the desert, fynbos and succulent Karoo biomes (Mucina & Rutherford, 2006). Major macroclimatic traits that characterise the grassland biome include:

a) Seasonal precipitation; and

b) The minimum temperatures in winter (Mucina & Rutherford, 2006).

The grassland biome is found chiefly on the high central plateau of South Africa, and the inland areas of KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. The topography is mainly flat and rolling but includes the escarpment itself. Altitude varies from near sea level to 2 850 m above sea level.

Grasslands are dominated by a single layer of grasses. The amount of cover depends on rainfall and the degree of grazing. The grassland biome experiences summer rainfall and dry winters with frost (and fire), which are unfavourable for tree growth. Thus, trees are typically absent, except in a few localized habitats. Geophytes (bulbs) are often abundant. Frosts, fire and grazing maintain the grass dominance and prevent the establishment of trees.

On a fine-scale vegetation type, the PAOI overlaps with the Carletonville Dolomite Grassland.

The distribution of the Gh 15 vegetation type is predominantly in the North-West and Gauteng province with a small portion being distributed within the Free State. This vegetation type ranges from Ventersdorp in the west till as far east as Centurion and Bapsfontein. The altitude of this vegetation type ranges between 1 360 meters above sea level to 1 620 meters above sea level (Mucina & Rutherford, 2006).

The vegetation within the Gh 15 vegetation type occurs in slightly undulating plains which are dissected by rocky ridges consisting of chert. This vegetation is associated with species-rich grasslands which form complex patterns dominated by a variety of species (Mucina & Rutherford, 2006).

The conservation status of the Gh 15 vegetation type has been determined to be vulnerable with a target percentage of 24. A small extent of this vegetation type is conserved in conservation areas which include the Sterkfontein Caves and Cradle of Humankind in general, the Oog Van Malmanie, Boskop Dam, Abe Bailey, Krugersdorp, Schoonspruit, Olifantsvlei and other private conservation areas. Approximately a quarter of this vegetation type has been transformed into cultivated lands, mining areas or built-up areas (Mucina & Rutherford, 2006).

3.1.3 Soils and Geology

According to the land type database (Land Type Survey Staff, 1972 - 2006), the project area is characterised by the Fa 16 land type. The Fa land type is characterised by Glenrosa and/or Mispah soil forms which are common in this area, however, other soils may occur. Lime is rare or absent throughout the entire landscape.

The geology of this area is characterised by chert and dolomite from the Transvaal Supergroup's Malmani Subgroup which mainly supports shallow soil forms, including Glenrosa and Mispah from the Fa land type. Other soil forms that are likely to occur within this region include deep red apedal soil types of Yellow-Brown Apedal soil types from the Ab land type (Mucina and Rutherford, 2006).

3.1.4 Climate

The project area is characterised by a warm-temperate summer rainfall with an overall mean annual precipitation of approximately 593 mm (Mucina & Rutherford, 2006). Severe frost frequently occurs within winter months with high temperatures within the summer months.

3.1.5 South African Inventory of Inland Aquatic Ecosystems

This spatial dataset is part of the South African Inventory of Inland Aquatic Ecosystems (SAIIAE) which was released as part of the National Biodiversity Assessment (NBA 2018). National Wetland Map 5 includes inland wetlands and estuaries, associated with river line data and many other datasets within the South African Inventory of Inland Aquatic Ecosystems (SAIIAE, 2018).

No wetlands were identified by means of this dataset.

3.1.6 NFEPA Wetlands

The NFEPA database is a collaborative project between multiple stakeholders such as CSIR, the WRC and SANBI. The objective of the project was to identify priority areas to conserve and protect as well as to promote sustainable water use, thereby assisting in meeting the biodiversity goals for freshwater habitats set out in all levels of government (Nel et al. 2011).

No wetlands were identified within the PAOI by means of this dataset.

3.1.7 Topographical Inland Water and River Lines

The topographical inland and river line data for "2627" quarter degree was used to identify potential wetland areas within the PAOI. This dataset indicates that there are no inland water areas present within the PAOI.

3.1.8 Terrain

The terrain of the 500 m regulated area has been analysed to determine potential areas where wetlands are more likely to accumulate (due to convex topographical features, preferential pathways, or more gentle slopes).

3.1.8.1 Digital Elevation Model (DEM)

A Digital Elevation Model (DEM) has been created to identify lower laying regions as well as potential convex topographical features which could point towards preferential flow paths. The 500 m regulated area ranges from 1 521 to 1 560 metres above sea level (MASL). The lower laying areas (generally represented in dark blue) represent the area that will have the highest potential to be characterised as wetlands (see Figure 3-1).

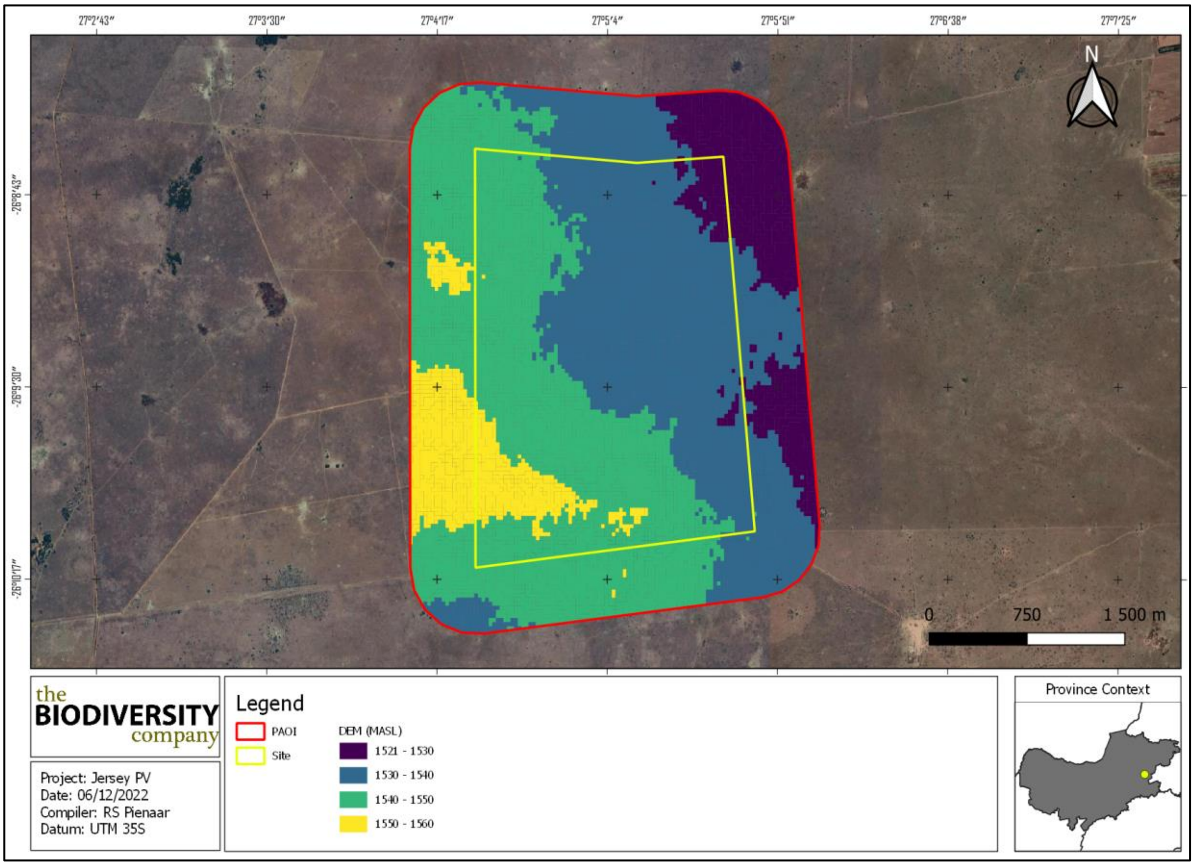

Figure 3-1 Digital Elevation Model of the 500 m regulated area

4 Field Assessment

4.1 Delineation and Description

During the site visit, no wetlands were identified within the PAOI. The project area was characterised by Vaalbos and Hutton soil forms, with other associated soils also occurring in the assessment footprint area. The Hutton soil form consists of an orthic topsoil horizon on top of a thick red apedal subsurface diagnostic horizon. The Vaalbos soil form consist of an orthic topsoil on top of a red apedal horizon underlain with a hard-rock substratum below. These soils will not be present within wetlands.

5 Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1 Baseline Ecology

During the site assessment, no wetlands were found within the project area of influence. The project area was characterised by Vaalbos and Hutton soil form which are dry soil forms not found within wetland areas.

5.2 Specialist Recommendation

During the assessment no wetlands were found within the project area of influence. Based on this, no Section 21 (c) and (i) water uses are required to b authorised for this project.

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