

# REPORT

On contract research for

***SAVANNAH ENVIRONMENTAL***



## **SOIL IMPACT ASSESSMENT FOR THE PROPOSED GEELSTERT 1 SOLAR PHOTOVOLTAIC (PV) DEVELOPMENT NEAR AGGENEYS, NORTHERN CAPE**

By

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## **DECLARATION**

I have over 30 years' experience in soil surveying, classification and interpretation. I have compiled over 150 soil survey reports, including numerous EIA and related studies. I have a PhD in soil science and am a member of the Soil Classification Working Group of South Africa.

I hereby declare that I am qualified to compile this report as a registered Natural Scientist (SACNASP Registration No. 400463/04) and that I am independent of any of the parties involved and that I have compiled an impartial report, based solely on all the information available.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'D G Paterson', is centered on a light gray rectangular background.

***D G Paterson***

June 2020

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

ARC-Institute for Soil, Climate and Water was contracted to undertake a soil and agricultural potential assessment as part of the Basic Assessment (BA) process being undertaken for a proposed solar photovoltaic (PV) development near the town of Aggeneys in the Northern Cape Province.

Geelstert Solar Facility 1 (Pty) Ltd is proposing the development of a commercial solar PV facility and associated infrastructure, known as Geelstert 1, on a site located approximately 11 km south-east of Aggeneys within the Khâi-Ma Local Municipality and the Namakwa District Municipality in the Northern Cape Province.

A development area (located within the study area and affected property, Remaining Extent of the Farm Bloemhoek 61) with an extent of ~578 ha has been identified by Geelstert Solar Facility 1 (Pty) Ltd as a technically suitable site for the development of a solar PV facility with a contracted capacity of up to 125 MW. The development footprint of Geelstert 1 will be located within the development area. The study area is located within Focus Area 8 of the Renewable Energy Development Zones (REDZ), which is known as the Springbok REDZ. Due to the location of the study area within a REDZ, a Basic Assessment (BA) process will be undertaken in accordance with GN R114, as formally gazetted on 16 February 2018.

The development area of Geelstert 1 is proposed to accommodate the following infrastructure, which will enable the solar PV facility to generate a contracted capacity of up to 125 MW:

- » Bifacial or monofacial PV panels, mounted on fixed-tilt or tracking mounting structures with a maximum height of 3.5 m;
- » Centralised inverter stations or string inverters;
- » A temporary laydown area;
- » Cabling between the panels, to be laid underground where practical;
- » An on-site facility substation stepping up from 22 kV or 33 kV to 132 kV or 220 kV, with an extent of up to 1ha to facilitate the connection between the solar PV facility and the grid connection solution;
- » An access road to the development with a maximum width of 8 m;
- » Internal access roads within the PV panel array area with a maximum width of 5 m;
- » Operation and Maintenance buildings including a gate house and security building, control centre, offices, warehouses, a workshop and visitors centre.

It is the Developer's intention to bid the solar PV facility under the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy's (DMRE) Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement Programme (REIPPPP). Ultimately, the project is intended to be part of the renewable energy projects portfolio for South Africa, as contemplated in the Integrated Resources Plan (IRP).

A separate Basic Assessment process will be undertaken for the Geelstert Grid Connection to connect Geelstert 1 to the Aggeneys Main Transmission Substation.

## **2. TERMS OF REFERENCE**

The purpose of the investigation is to contribute to the Impact Assessment process for the proposed Geelstert 1 project. The objectives of the study are;

- To obtain all existing soil and related information,
- To produce a soil map of the specified area, and
- To assess broad agricultural potential and impacts.

### **2.1 Legislative and Policy Framework**

In terms of the Subdivision of Agricultural Land Act (Act 70 of 1970), any application for change of land use must be approved by the Minister of Agriculture, while under the Conservation of Agricultural Resources Act (Act 43 of 1983) no degradation of natural land is permitted.

The following section summarises South African Environmental Legislation with regard to soil and agricultural issues:

- The law on ***Conservation of Agricultural Resources*** (Act 43 of 1983) states that the degradation of the agricultural potential of soil is illegal. The Act also requires the protection of land against soil erosion and the prevention of water logging and salinization of soils by means of suitable soil conservation works to be constructed and maintained. The utilisation of marshes, water sponges and watercourses are also addressed.

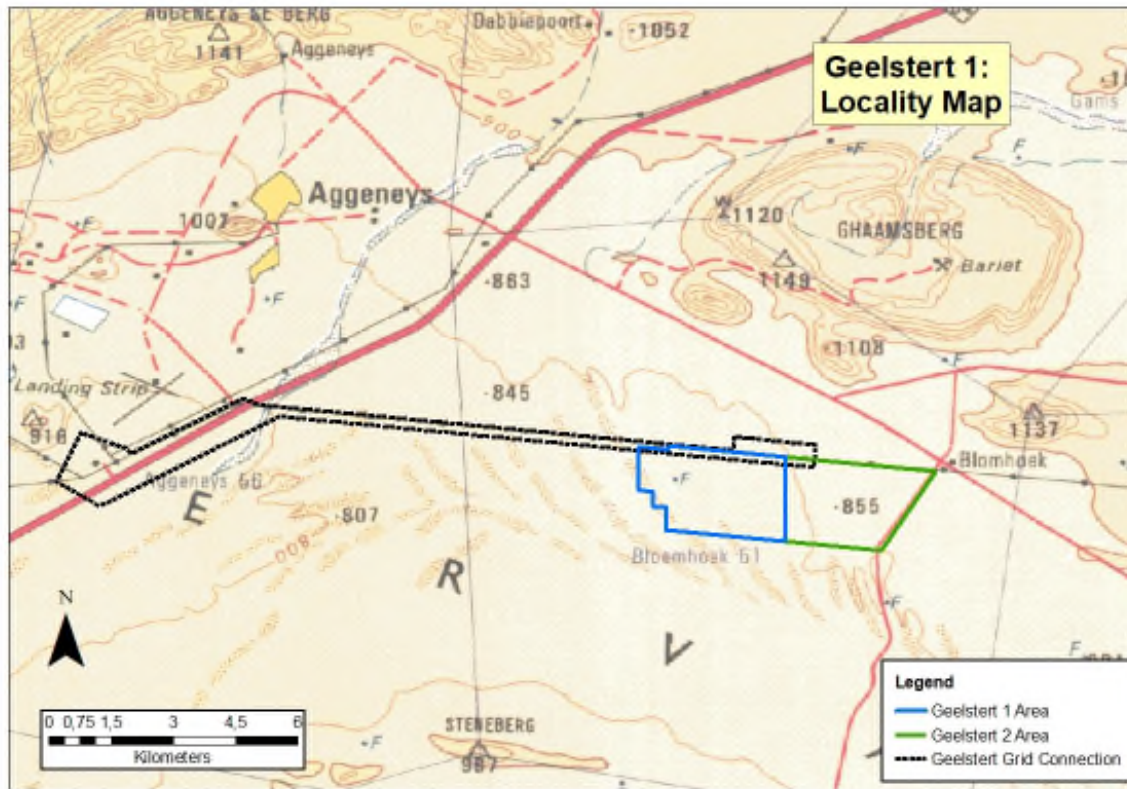
- The **Bill of Rights** states that environmental rights exist primarily to ensure good health and well-being, and secondarily to protect the environment through reasonable legislation, ensuring the prevention of the degradation of resources.
- Environmental rights are furthered in the **National Environmental Management Act** (No. 107 of 1998), which prescribes three principals, namely the precautionary principle, the “polluter pays” principle and the preventive principle. It is stated in the above-mentioned act that the individual/group responsible for the degradation/pollution of natural resources is required to rehabilitate the polluted source.
- Soils and land capability are protected under the **National Environmental Management Act** (Act 107 of 1998), the **Environmental Conservation Act** (Act 73 of 1989) and the **Conservation of Agricultural Resources Act** (Act 43 of 1983).
- The **National Veld and Forest Fire Bill** of 10 July 1998 and the **Fertiliser, Farm Feeds, Agricultural Remedies and Stock Remedies Act** (Act 36 of 1947) can also be applicable in some cases.
- The **National Environmental Management Act** (Act 107 of 1998) requires that pollution and degradation of the environment be avoided, or, where they cannot be avoided, are minimised and remedied.

### **3. SITE CHARACTERISTICS**

#### **3.1 Location**

The area for the proposed Geelstert 1 project site which was investigated is located to the south-east of the town of Aggeneys on the Remaining Extent of the farm Bloemhoek 61. The broader surrounding area comprises the Geelstert 2 solar PV project immediately to the east, along with a grid connection corridor to connect the

infrastructure to the Aggeneis Main Transmission Substation (MTS). The position of the proposed Geelstert 1 project site is shown by the **blue polygon** on Figure 1.



**Figure 1** *Geelstert 1 Locality Map*

### 3.2 Terrain

The study area consists of gently undulating topography, with slopes of less than 5% over most of the area, and with an altitude above sea level of between 820 and 850 m. The current natural vegetation of the project site comprises very sparse natural shrub vegetation (see Figure 2). The southern and western boundary of the site borders onto a dune system (see Figure 3).



**Figure 2** *Natural vegetation in study area*





**Figure 3** *Dune landscape towards the southern boundary of the study area*

### **3.3 Climate**

The climate of the area has a mostly all year rainfall distribution, but the annual average is very low, at around 75 mm per year, although this might be slightly higher in the higher parts of the landscape (Koch *et al.*, 1987). Temperatures will be warm to very hot in summer, with daily maximums regularly exceeding 40°C, but cool to cold in winter, with almost no occurrence of frost.

### **3.4 Parent Material**

The area is underlain by Quaternary sediments, mostly sandy (Geological Survey, 1984). As previously stated, dunes occur in places in the landscape.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY (Land Type Survey)

Existing desk-top information was obtained from the map sheet 2918 Pofadder (Schloms & Ellis, 1987) from the National Land Type Survey, published at a 1:250 000 scale. A **land type** is defined as an area with a uniform terrain type, macroclimate and broad soil pattern. The soils are classified according to MacVicar *et al* (1977).

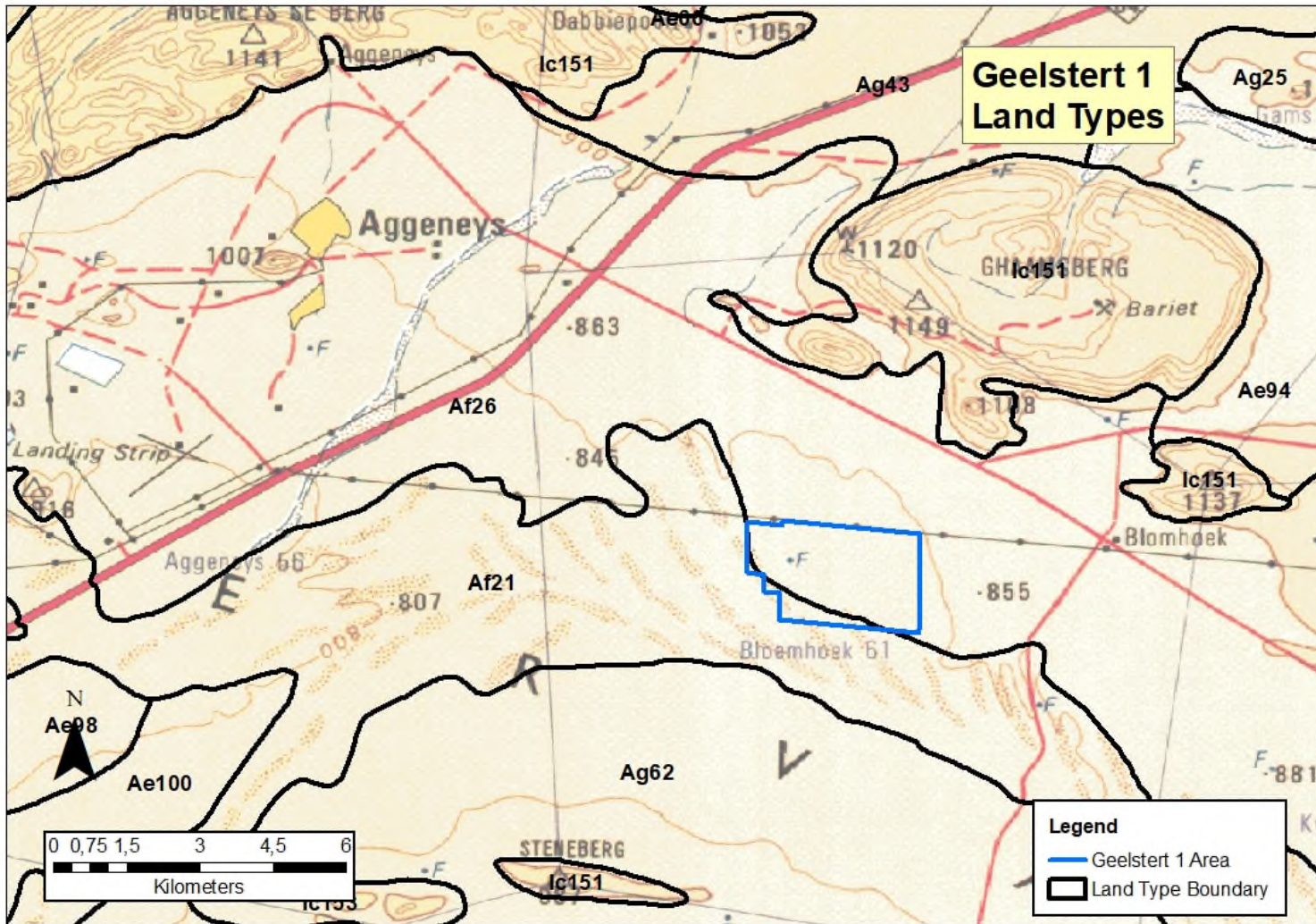
The broad study area under investigation is covered by two land types, as shown on the map in Figure 4, namely:

- **Af21, Af26** (High base status, red soils, with dunes)

It should be clearly noted that, since the information contained in the land type survey is of a reconnaissance nature, only the general dominance of the soils in the landscape can be given, and not the actual areas of occurrence within a specific land type. Also, other soils that were not identified due to the scale of the survey may also occur.

A summary of the dominant soil characteristics of each land type is given in Table 1 below.

Column 6 shows the distribution of agricultural potential per soil class within each land type (see Section 5), with the dominant class shown in **bold**. These figures will always add up to 100%, so that the relative proportions of each potential class within every land type can be determined and easily compared with other land types.



**Figure 4** Land types occurring, Geelstert 1

***Geelstert 1: Soils and Agricultural potential***

**Table 1** Land types present within the study area (with soils in order of dominance)

Land Type	Dominant soils	Depth (mm)	Percent within land type	Characteristics	Agric. Soil Potential* (%)
<b>Af21</b>	Hutton 31	>1200	75%	Red, sandy, structureless dune soils	High: 0.0 Mod: 0.0
	Hutton 32/35	300-700	16%	Red, sandy, structureless soils, on calcrete/dorbank	<b>Low: 100.0</b>
<b>Af26</b>	Hutton 30/31	>1200	63%	Red, sandy, structureless soils, occasional dunes	High: 0.0 Mod: 0.0
	Fernwood 21	>1200	17%	Grey, sandy, structureless soils	<b>Low: 100.0</b>

\***Note** – this describes the **soil characteristics only**, and does not take into account any other limiting factors, such as climate.



## 5 SOILS

### 5.1 Field observations

The vicinity of the project site was visited for a previous development ("Aggeneis 1 and 2") on 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> November 2018. The purpose of the field visit was to confirm, by reconnaissance ground-truthing, the soils occurring in the area, as well as to carry out a visual evaluation of the landscape. The soils were investigated using a hand-held soil auger on a free style basis throughout the study area. No samples were collected, due mainly to the low prevailing agricultural potential.

As evident from Figure 4, Geelstert 1 lies mostly within land type **Af26**, which consists largely of deep, sandy soils. However, possibly due to the location at the foot of the rocky hills to the north, the field investigation confirmed the presence of much shallower soils on the site in question, with soils classified as belonging to the **Garies** (orthic topsoil on red apedal subsoil on cemented dorbank) and **Knersvlakte** (orthic topsoil on cemented dorbank) forms, with depths of less than 450 mm. Some outcrops of gravel and dorbank were also observed at the surface, as shown in Figure 5.



**Figure 5** Cemented dorbank layer exposed in soil profile

## **5.2 Erodibility**

The soils present in most of the Geelstert 1 project site are not considered susceptible to erosion by water. However, if the vegetation cover is disturbed (for example by overgrazing or construction activities) and considering the sandy nature of the topsoils, as well as the dry climate, there is a significant possibility of removal of some or all of the topsoil by wind action.

This can be mitigated by ensuring that the minimum area is disturbed, and that rehabilitation of surface vegetation is carried out as soon as possible.

## **6. AGRICULTURAL POTENTIAL**

As can be seen from the information contained in Table 1, there are no high potential soils present within the project site and the soils are generally of low potential at best. This is mainly due to a combination of the shallow depths (observed during the field visit) and the sandy textures which will lead to rapid water infiltration and the soils drying out.

In addition, the low rainfall in the area (Section 3.3) means that there is little potential for rain-fed arable agriculture in the entire area in any case. Arable production would therefore be possible only by irrigation, and no indications of any irrigated areas, within and surrounding the project site, can be identified through Google Earth.

In general, the soils that do occur within the project site are suited for extensive grazing at best and furthermore the grazing capacity of the area is very low, at around 26-40 ha/large stock unit (ARC-ISCW, 2004).

### **6.1 Recommendations**

The prevailing potential of the soils for rain-fed cultivation throughout most of the area, as well as the use of irrigation activities for cultivation, is low. Considering the land types and soils located within the Geelstert 1 project site and the current land-use activities, it is recommended that no further detailed soil investigation is required for the Geelstert 1 project.

## 7. IMPACTS

### ***Assessment of Impacts***

Direct, indirect and cumulative impacts of the issues identified through the scoping study, as well as all other issues identified in the EIA phase are assessed in terms of the following criteria:

- » The **nature**, which includes a description of what causes the effect, what will be affected and how it will be affected.
- » The **extent**, wherein it is indicated whether the impact will be local (limited to the immediate area or site of development) or regional, and a value between 1 and 5 will be assigned as appropriate (with 1 being low and 5 being high):
- » The **duration**, wherein it is indicated whether:
  - \* the lifetime of the impact will be of a very short duration (0–1 years) – assigned a score of 1;
  - \* the lifetime of the impact will be of a short duration (2-5 years) - assigned a score of 2;
  - \* medium-term (5–15 years) – assigned a score of 3;
  - \* long term (> 15 years) - assigned a score of 4; or
  - \* permanent - assigned a score of 5;
- » The **consequences (magnitude)**, quantified on a scale from 0-10, where 0 is small and will have no effect on the environment, 2 is minor and will not result in an impact on processes, 4 is low and will cause a slight impact on processes, 6 is moderate and will result in processes continuing but in a modified way, 8 is high (processes are altered to the extent that they temporarily cease), and 10 is very high and results in complete destruction of patterns and permanent cessation of processes.
- » The **probability of occurrence**, which describes the likelihood of the impact actually occurring. Probability will be estimated on a scale of 1–5, where 1 is very improbable (probably will not happen), 2 is improbable (some possibility, but low likelihood), 3 is probable (distinct possibility), 4 is highly probable (most likely) and 5 is definite (impact will occur regardless of any prevention measures).
- » the **significance**, which is determined through a synthesis of the characteristics described above and can be assessed as low, medium or high; and
- » the **status**, which is described as either positive, negative or neutral.
- » the degree to which the impact can be reversed.
- » the degree to which the impact may cause irreplaceable loss of resources.

» the *degree* to which the impact can be *mitigated*.

The **significance** is calculated by combining the criteria in the following formula:

$$S = (E+D+M) \times P$$

S = Significance weighting

E = Extent

D = Duration

M = Magnitude

P = Probability

The **significance weightings** for each potential impact are as follows:

- » < 30 points: Low (i.e. where this impact would not have a direct influence on the decision to develop in the area),
- » 30-60 points: Medium (i.e. where the impact could influence the decision to develop in the area unless it is effectively mitigated),
- » > 60 points: High (i.e. where the impact must have an influence on the decision process to develop in the area).

Two impacts have been identified to be associated with the development of Geelstert 1 from a soil perspective; these impacts include:

**Impact 1 (Table 2)**: In most environmental investigations, the major impact on the natural resources of the site would be the loss of potential agricultural land due to the installation of the solar panels and construction of the associated infrastructure. However, in this instance, there is no evidence of any cultivation in the vicinity, so this impact would be of extremely limited significance and would be local in extent, if at all.

**Impact 2 (Table 3)**: In this area, the sandy soils, coupled with the dry climate, means that a possible impact would be the increased risk of wind erosion of the topsoil when vegetation cover is removed or disturbed. This would be especially relevant for the construction of access roads and other associated infrastructure.

The significance of the impacts can be summarised as follows:



**Table 2** Loss of agricultural land, Geelstert 1

<b>Nature: Loss of potentially productive agricultural land (both construction and operation phase)</b>		
	<b>Without mitigation</b>	<b>With mitigation</b>
<b>Extent</b>	Local (1)	Local (1)
<b>Duration</b>	Long-term (4)	Long-term (4)
<b>Magnitude</b>	Low (4)	Minor (2)
<b>Probability</b>	Improbable (2)	Improbable (2)
<b>Significance (E+D+M) x P</b>	<b>Low (18)</b>	<b>Low (14)</b>
<b>Status (positive or negative)</b>	Negative	Negative
<b>Reversibility</b>	Low	High
<b>Irreplaceable loss of resources?</b>	No	No
<b>Can impacts be mitigated?</b>	Yes	
<b>Mitigation:</b> The main mitigation measures would be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To minimise the footprint of construction as much as possible.</li> </ul>		
<b>Cumulative impacts:</b> likely to be low, as all soil-related aspects will be confined to the site, and the prevailing agricultural potential in the area is low.		
<b>Residual Risks:</b> likely to be low, since the implementation of the appropriate mitigation measures will enable more or less complete rehabilitation during and after the life of the project.		

**Table 3:** Soil erosion

<b>Nature: Increased soil erosion hazard by wind (construction and operation phase)</b>		
	<b>Without mitigation</b>	<b>With mitigation</b>
<b>Extent</b>	Local to regional (3)	Local (1)
<b>Duration</b>	Permanent (5)	Short-term (2)
<b>Magnitude</b>	High (8)	Minor (2)
<b>Probability</b>	Highly probable (4)	Improbable (2)
<b>Significance (E+D+M) x P</b>	<b>High (64)</b>	<b>Low (10)</b>
<b>Status (positive or negative)</b>	Negative	Negative
<b>Reversibility</b>	Low	High
<b>Irreplaceable loss of resources?</b>	Very possible	No
<b>Can impacts be mitigated?</b>	Yes	
<b>Mitigation:</b> The main mitigation measures would be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To minimise the footprint of construction as much as possible.</li> <li>Where soil is removed/disturbed, ensure it is stored for rehabilitation and re-vegetated as soon as possible.</li> <li>Implement all appropriate soil conservation measures, including contouring, culverts etc. (for road construction), geotextiles and slope stabilisation (for all infrastructure).</li> </ul>		
<b>Cumulative impacts:</b> likely to be high, as wind erosion can carry soil particles for a considerable distance, depending on wind strength and direction, as well as soil texture.		
<b>Residual Risks:</b> if mitigation is not carried out, long-term wind erosion, with results such as loss of valuable topsoil, may occur.		

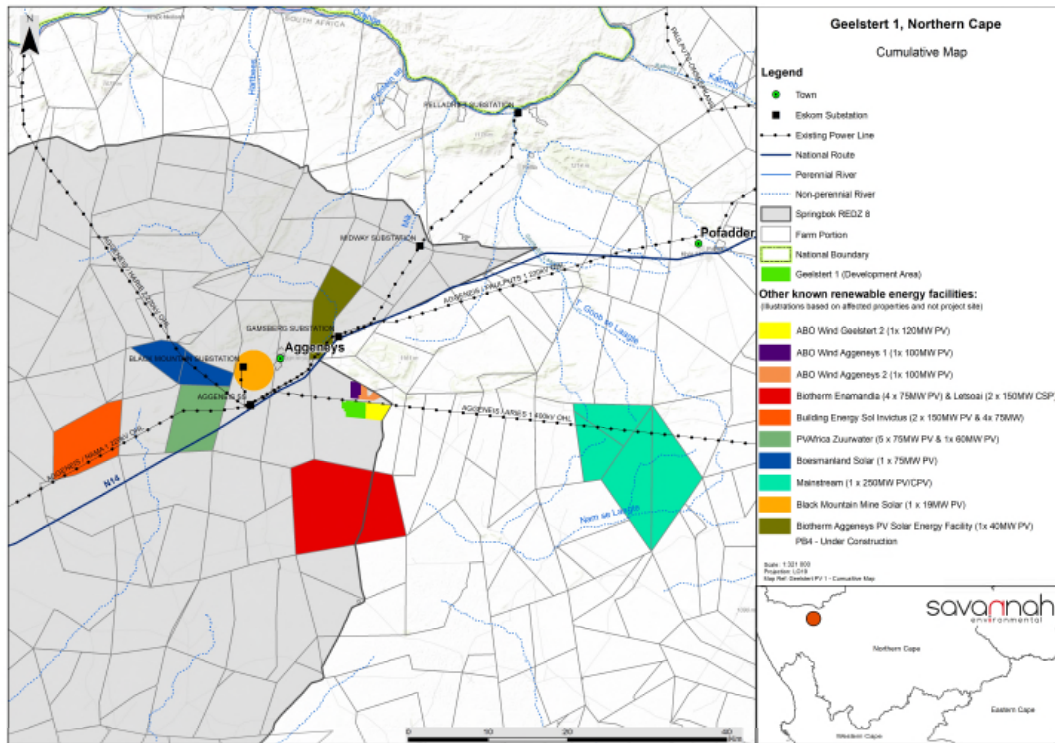
The main impact would be due to the construction related activities for the solar panels and connecting infrastructure (roads, buildings, cables etc.).

### **7.1 Cumulative Impacts**

The likelihood of cumulative impacts for wind erosion may be significant, if not mitigated. This is because concurrent developments are proposed close to the Geelstert 1 project site investigated in this report, as shown in Figure 6. The impacts are summarised in Table 4 below.

When considering the other renewable energy developments within the surrounding area (within a 30 km radius from the development area), it is assumed that the impact of erosion and appropriate mitigation measures at a site-specific level for each of the facilities has been considered and the mitigation measures recommended are sufficient for the management and mitigation of erosion. Therefore, considering that the impact of erosion at each facility will be low in extent, subject to the implementation of the recommended mitigation measures, and managed for each facility separately, the cumulative impact for erosion is considered to be low. Under these circumstances, the loss associated with erosion is therefore considered to be acceptable loss, without detrimental consequences.

If there is large scale development of renewable energy facilities in the area, any failure to prevent wind erosion of topsoil on one project could lead to that material being deposited on any or all neighbouring properties.



**Figure 6** Map showing Renewable Energy projects in the vicinity of Geelstert 1

## 7.2 Assumptions and Limitations

The main limitation regarding soil information has been addressed with the field visit, which has confirmed soil conditions prevalent in the area, as well as carrying out a visual inspection.

It is assumed that, for accurate determination of any cumulative impacts, there will be an optimal level of co-operation between representatives of all projects planned in the vicinity in the future. This will ensure that important environmental information is not withheld, that could lead to increased impact levels, such as wind erosion.

The cumulative impacts are summarised in Table 4 below.

**Table 4** Cumulative Impacts

<b>Nature:</b> Cumulative impact of the Proposed Development in terms of wind erosion		
	<b>Overall impact of the proposed project considered in isolation<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Cumulative impact of the project and other projects in the area<sup>2</sup></b>
<b>Extent</b>	Local (1)	Local (2)
<b>Duration</b>	Short-term (2)	Short-term (2)
<b>Magnitude</b>	Minor (2)	Minor (2)
<b>Probability</b>	Improbable (2)	Improbable (2)
<b>Significance (E+D+M)x P</b>	<b>Low (10)</b>	<b>Low (12)</b>
<b>Status (positive/negative)</b>	Negative	Negative
<b>Reversibility</b>	High	High
<b>Loss of resources?</b>	No	No
<b>Can impacts be mitigated?</b>	Yes	
<b>Confidence in findings:</b> High.		
<b>Mitigation:</b> The main mitigation measures would be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To minimise the footprint of construction for each facility as much as possible.</li> <li>• Where soil is removed/disturbed, ensure it is stored for rehabilitation and re-vegetated as soon as possible.</li> <li>• Implement all appropriate soil conservation measures, including contouring, culverts etc. (for road construction), geotextiles and slope stabilisation (for all infrastructure).</li> <li>• Ensure that equal responsibility and co-operation is accepted if more than one facility will be using the same access road, or if the possibility exists of sediment transfer (by wind or water) from one site to another.</li> </ul>		
<b>Residual Risks:</b> Significant risk of accelerated soil erosion by wind if mitigation measures of each facility are not applied correctly.		

<sup>1</sup> It is assumed that the appropriate mitigation measures have been implemented.

<sup>2</sup> It is assumed that the appropriate mitigation measures have been implemented.

## 8 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main recommendation is that care should be taken within all aspects of the construction phase to ensure that erosion is managed and mitigated appropriately. The Geelstert 1 project site is a dry area, with fragile vegetation and sandy topsoils and will be susceptible to uncontrolled topsoil removal by wind. The long-term effects of ignoring this aspect could be severe, both for the project and for the surrounding environment.

### 8.1 Measures for inclusion in the draft Environmental Management Programme

**OBJECTIVE:** Conservation, as far as possible, of the existing soil resource, both on site and in adjoining areas.

<b>Project component/s</b>	Construction of all infrastructure where topsoil will be disturbed
<b>Potential Impact</b>	Loss of topsoil leading to wind erosion
<b>Activity/risk source</b>	Construction activities
<b>Mitigation: Target/Objective</b>	To retain all topsoil with a stable soil surface

Mitigation: Action/control	Responsibility	Timeframe
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Storage of all topsoil that is disturbed (maximum height 2 m; maximum length of time before re-use 18 months).</li> <li>Immediate replacement of topsoil after the undertaking of construction activities within an area</li> <li>Soil conservation measures must be put in place to ensure soil stabilisation</li> </ul>	Construction Engineer	Construction
	Construction Engineer	Construction
	Construction Engineer	Post-Construction

<b>Performance Indicator</b>	No indications of visible topsoil loss
<b>Monitoring</b>	Visual inspection every 6 months (minimum) of all areas where disturbance has taken place (for both the construction phase and the duration of the project). Responsibility: Project site manager. If soil loss is suspected, acceleration of soil conservation and rehabilitation measures must be implemented (as specified above).

Considering the findings of the report and the current soils environment within which Geelstert 1 is proposed, it is the opinion of the specialist that the proposed activities should be authorised, subject to the implementation of the recommended mitigation measures. The activities proposed are considered to be acceptable from a soil perspective considering the characteristics and potential of the soils present within the project site.

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