ECOLOGY

Vegetation

The current vegetation coverage at WEL Wind Park predominantly comprises pasture grasses and weeds, with indigenous forest, scrubland and wetland fragments sparsely scattered throughout. The wind farm is, however, situated between Mount Pirongia and Mount Karioi, which are the largest areas of indigenous vegetation cover in the Kawhia Ecological District. No endangered or vulnerable plant species were found within the wind farm area.

No indigenous bush or scrubland would be removed or disturbed by the construction of any of the proposed turbines, their platforms or access roads. Approximately 0.5ha of mixed broadleaf-podocarp forest would require removal as a result of the widening and upgrading of Plateau Road. This clearance involves the removal of scattered shrubs and several pole miro and rimu trees along the margin the existing road.

Birds

Thirty two bird species have been identified as being present within the Te Uku area, with another two species also likely to be present but not recorded. The predominant birds found within the wind farm itself were common grassland passerines and wetland species, comprising of hedge sparrow, house sparrow, yellow hammer, New Zealand pipit, skylark, Australian magpie, chaffinch, swallow, spur-winged plover and paradise duck. Most commonly observed or heard birds within the bush habitats adjacent to the Wind Park were grey warbler, fantail, tui, kereru, shining cuckoo and morepork. The occasional tomtit was also heard and there are recent records of New Zealand falcon being present.

The impact of wind turbines on bird mortality rates is very small if careful consideration is given to the wind farm location in respect of the natural ecology of the area and the lack of bird strikes noted within in the wind farms in Manawatu is testimony to this. Available overseas evidence also indicates that any impacts of wind farms on wildlife tend to be limited where wind turbines are sited to avoid migratory flight paths and significant habitats. The proposed site is not on any known migration route for either international or internal migratory waders.

The wide spacing between the turbines in the WEL Wind Park proposal, rather than a cluster of tightly fitting turbines, will be more beneficial to New Zealand falcons, as this will allow them to easily pass by between them and continue to reach the fragmented bush blocks and farmland in which they are likely to be hunting in this area.

Bats

Long-tailed bats were found to be foraging and commuting along the Pirongia Forest Park and also along the ridge lines near the proposed wind farm. New Zealand bats are non-migratory and tend to remain within their birth-place home ranges. This suggests that long-tailed bats do not undertake long, non-echolocation flights and thus may be able to detect and avoid wind turbines.