

Guidance to Address Impacts to Deer Winter Habitat Associated with Solar Energy Projects

Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department

November 12, 2015

Steps for avoiding and minimizing impacts to deer winter habitat (DWH):

1. Avoid developing solar energy projects within a functioning DWH. No softwood trees should be removed within the DWH. Access roads that may fragment DWH must be no wider than 15 feet and softwood canopy allowed to close the road opening;
2. For solar project proposed in fields or other open areas near or adjacent to DWH, a buffer of up to 100 feet, based on a determination by a Department biologist, should be maintained from the edge of the project to the edge of the softwood cover. The buffer should be managed to maintain and enhance natural vegetation to benefit deer and other wildlife (e.g., buffer vegetation management requirements will be established as a permit condition and usually will require periodic brush mowing to provide browse for deer and habitat for other wildlife);
3. Do not construct the solar project during the period December 15 through April 15 to avoid indirect disturbance of wintering deer, unless determined otherwise based on size of DWA, topography, type of construction activity, or other factors (e.g., NLEBs);
4. Limit project maintenance visits during the period December 15 through April 15 to once per month, except for emergency circumstances;
5. Solar energy projects must be designed so that shade trees are identified and addressed in the assessment of impacts to DWH; and
6. Where wildlife movement within or between DWH or other important habitats (e.g., wetlands) is a concern, do not install fence around the solar facility (see ANR solar energy development guidelines). For all other facilities, apply a standard 8 foot high fence using woven wire mesh no smaller than 6 inches. This creates an exclusionary fence designed to prevent deer from entering the enclosed area and becoming entrapped.

Areas the Department considers unlikely for solar energy development to present concerns with significant wildlife habitat:

1. Other previously disturbed sites including gravel pits, quarries, and brown fields where there is not prior expectation for other site restoration requirements;
2. Along State Highways and medians;
3. Parking areas;
4. Landfills;
5. Roof tops of buildings; and
6. Other developed areas where conflicts with wildlife are minimal.