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New Era CEO pulls plug on Goodhue wind project

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ST. PAUL — After five years of protracted debate and legal wrangling, the controversial New Era wind project proposed in Goodhue County is now dead.

"New Era no longer intends to develop a wind energy project in Goodhue County, and respectfully requests that the Commission close all four dockets and all pending matters related thereto," New Era CEO Peter Mastic wrote in a four-paragraph letter filed with the Minnesota Public Utilities Commission

The letter, dated Sept. 6 and posted on the PUC docket on Tuesday, represents a stark reversal of past efforts to keep the 78-megawatt project alive. Since 2008, project developers have spent more than \$15 million seeking state permits, according to paperwork filed with the PUC in late 2012. Opponents have spent six figures and invested thousands of hours fighting it every step of the way.

A typical wind project is approved within one year.

A PUC spokesperson said Tuesday that the Commission must still meet, likely in October, to consider closing the dockets and revoking the project's site permit, which was issued in 2011.

But that appears a mere formality, and citizens opposed to the wind project are ready to celebrate.

"I believe the toe tag is now on the body," said rural Zumbrota resident Kristi Rosenquist, a member of the Coalition for Sensible Siting. Rosenquist has contended that the project has been "dead" for months.

Mastic's brief letter outlines the actions necessary to fully resolve the outstanding issues of the \$180 million project. They include:

- Withdrawing a request for approval of an updated Avian and Bat Protection Plan.
- Withdrawing a request for an extension of the certificate of need previously granted by the PUC.
- Terminating the site permit conditionally granted by the PUC in August 2011.

Additionally, New Era has withdrawn its request with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service that seeks the country's first incidental take permit to harm or kill bald eagles.

It's unclear if New Era will continue to pursue its lawsuit against some project participants who attempted to cancel their contracts. Mastic has not returned phone calls from the Post-Bulletin since November 2012. Dan Schleck, the attorney representing the landowners, said he plans to move for dismissal based on Tuesday's news.

"I think it will probably help my clients ... because I now have grounds to move for a dismissal," Schleck said.

The New Era project, which was previously owned by Texas billionaire T. Boone Pickens, is generally considered the most controversial wind project in Minnesota's history. It has frequently been mentioned in national debates regarding subsidies and initiatives for renewable energy.

Dan Rechtzigel, the Goodhue County Board chairman who sat on the wind committee that helped craft the county's updated wind ordinance in 2010, said Tuesday that he was "not surprised" by Mastic's filing.

"Kind of where it's been headed for awhile," Rechtzigel said.