CAPX2020 AND MINNESOTA EIS
RISKS MISSISSIPPI RIVER FLYWAY

CAPX2020 plans to enlarge power lines and towers that cross the Mississippi River Flyway from Kellogg, Minnesota to Alma, Wisconsin. They will rise from 80 feet to 199 in migratory airspace used by nearly 300 bird species. The Minnesota Environmental Impact Statement of the Hampton-Rochester-La Crosse route shortchanges the Mississippi's ecology, recommending the crossing to move electricity to Wisconsin, possibly Chicago.

Forest Service reports estimate power-line collisions kill 130-175 million birds per year in the U.S., perhaps millions more. Minnesota's EIS trivializes the threat, claiming "the effect of transmission lines on avian species are negligible beyond one mile," citing its tunnel vision from the 1994 Avian Power Line Interaction Committee—created by ten electric companies and one wildlife agency.

The one-mile claim in the 1994 document derives from a Colorado study which says, "no sandhill crane and waterfowl collisions occurred where distance from power lines to bird use areas exceeded 1.6 km (1 mi.)." The statement mentions no other species. Subsequent APLIC guidelines exclude the one-mile suggestion.

Minnesota's EIS assumes the narrowest crossing the safest for birds. But Alma's power-plant site squeezes the crossing from one side and mono-cultural agriculture from the other, creating a bottleneck for species using the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge--which supports 185 Neo-tropical migrants, 74 which show significant declines since 1966, says Eastern Region Breeding Bird Survey data.

During the nineties I conducted Breeding Bird Censuses at a mature floodplain forest that matches the silver maple forest at CAPX2020's crossing. The habitat supports about 250 nest territories of Neo-trops per 100 acres, one of the continent's highest densities.

Lines currently below treetops will rise above them, creating an increased risk for Neo-trops (wintering below the Tropic of Cancer) and other species following and foraging the forest. Lines may concentrate collisions amid a forest type used by North American's most swiftly declining warbler, the cerulean; the river's most threatened hawk, the red-shouldered; and a floodplain specialist in migration, the disappearing rusty blackbird.

Autumn fog and strong winds decrease birds' visibility and maneuverability and raise collision risks during waterfowl season. The upper Mississippi supports 40% of the continent's waterfowl, and when guns go off, songbirds and ducks fly in panic. Birds fly through CAPX2020's crossing to areas closed to hunting—Peterson and Big Lakes upriver--Weaver Bottoms and McCarthy Lake downriver. Minnesota's EIS ignores the disturbance surrounding the crossing. It involves high-use habitats a little more than a mile away.

Lesser scaup—bluebills—illustrate a larger story for the flyway. Their population is about 50% less today than during the late 1970s, says Dr. Michael Anteau, Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center. Bluebills winter in the Gulf of Mexico and in disappearing coastal marshes oiled by Deepwater Horizon in 2010. It forages in the zone of hypoxia caused by phosphorus and nitrogen runoff, which diminishes their prey--snails, clams and mussels.

Bluebills fly north and concentrate on the Mississippi at Pool 19 near Hamilton, Illinois, where they find abundant fingernail clams and mussels. But they specialize on freshwater shrimp in the upper Midwest and find insufficient food as they migrate, says Anteau. Hens have been found with 50% fewer fat reserves in Iowa and Minnesota than at Pool 19.

Hens may arrive at nesting grounds such as Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories without enough fat stores to develop eggs. They may die migrating or reach nest sites too late to raise chicks. Bluebills nest in boreal wetlands diminished and denigrated by global warming. As permafrost melts in the far north, wetlands shrink, water chemistry changes, and so may insect hatches that chicks depend upon.

Since coal-generated electricity—a primary cause of climate change—moves from North Dakota through CAPX2020 lines, the power humming through the Kellogg-Alma crossing impacts birds from Alaska to Baffin Island and beyond, in boreal habitats used by more than 1,000 species.

Locks and dams, unnatural flow, pollution and exotic species already damage the Mississippi River Flyway so thoroughly the river no longer creates its own islands, and floodplain forests already 90% diminished can hardly regenerate. The flyway needs cleaner water, cooler air, natural flow, more habitat, not new gigantic obstructions or an EIS that shirks conservation issues.

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