Illinois Department of
Natural Resources
One Natural Resources Way Springfield, Illinois 62702-1271
www.dnr.illinois.gov

Pat Quinn, Governor
Marc Miller, Director

April 11, 2014

Mr. Kenneth Lynn, Consulting Environmental Scientist
Ameren Services
1901 Chouteau Ave.
P.O. Box 66149, MC 635
St. Louis, MO 63166

RE: Illinois Rivers Project, Pana-Faraday Segment, Christian/Macon Counties
IDNR Environmental Resources Review
EcoCAT Report #1410055

Dear Mr. Lynn:

This letter provides IDNR's comments resulting from its review of the approved route between the proposed Pana Substation and the proposed Faraday Substation for this portion of the Illinois Rivers Project 345-kV transmission line.

This review considered potential avian impacts; potential effects to species listed as endangered or threatened by the Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board and their essential habitats; potential effects to sites identified in the Illinois Natural Areas Inventory (INAI Sites); potential effects to State Parks; potential effects to large forest blocks or grasslands; and potential effects to wetland resources.

Bald Eagle/Golden Eagle. More than 5,000 **Bald Eagles**, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, were present in Illinois during the Winter Count of 2014, shattering prior records. About 90% of these birds were concentrated along the Mississippi River, with many of the remainder along the Illinois River. In recent years a number of nests have appeared along the Lower Sangamon River. However, only the Flat Branch of the South Fork of the Sangamon River, extending eastward from Taylorville, provides potentially suitable nesting habitat for the Bald Eagle. There are no known nests in the vicinity at this time.

Golden Eagles, *Aquila chrysaetos*, are being reported in increasing numbers in Illinois, but are only winter residents. This species has been identified along the Mississippi River as far south as Monroe County in recent years, and an injured Golden Eagle was recovered from southwestern Champaign County in October 2013. There are no features of particular importance for this species in the vicinity, but winter migrants may occur.

Both species are vulnerable to collision with power lines and electrocution while perching. *The Department recommends the design and configuration of the power line and its supporting structures*

employ the methods recommended by the Avian Power Line Interaction Committee (APLIC) to limit Eagle injury/mortality.

American Golden Plover, *Pluvialis dominica*. This non-listed migratory bird stages in east-central Illinois and west-central Indiana each spring, where, between April and June, it experiences a molt on its way to Arctic breeding grounds. (Its fall migration follows the Atlantic Coast, so its mid-continent presence is limited to the spring season.) It requires open spaces and is sensitive to verticality, whether trees or structures, and also to breaks in habitat, such as roads (regardless of traffic frequency). Corn and soybean fields which contain ephemeral farmed wetlands provide ideal habitat away from roads and structures. This species is seldom seen within 70 meters of roads and is also never seen within 400 meters of commercial wind turbines. Consequently, power lines which cross fields will render a portion of a suitable field untenable for this species, for roughly three times the height of the supporting structures in each direction.

Portions of southeastern Macon County have been designated as an Important Bird Area due to the spring staging area it provides to the American Golden Plover. To the extent the power line route follows other breaks in habitat, such as highways or county and township roads, or fencerows, additional exclusion due to the power line will be minimized.

Endangered or Threatened Species. Christian and Macon Counties lie within the geographic range of the **Indiana Bat**, *Myotis sodalis*, but the Department has no records of the capture or collection of this species in these counties. Likewise, the Department has no records of the capture or collection of the **Northern Long-Eared Bat**, *Myotis septentrionalis*, in Macon County, but a single 1974 record exists for Christian County. The Indiana Bat may be absent from this region of the state, but it should be presumed the Northern Long-Eared Bat is present in Christian and Macon Counties in suitable habitat, though it may be rare.

The Indiana Bat is federally-listed as endangered and state-listed as endangered. The Northern Long-Eared Bat will become federally-listed as endangered in October 2014, whereupon it will automatically become state-listed, as well. The USFWS has already issued guidance stating that those operations which may result in taking the Northern Long-Eared Bat after October 2014 should be treated as though they will take a listed species, beginning immediately.

The Indiana Bat and the Northern Long-Eared Bat hibernate in caves and mines in the winter, but roost in trees during the summer activity season.

The approved route intersects wooded areas only near riparian corridors and towns. *To avoid violating protective statutes, tree-clearing should occur before April 1 or after November 15.* Tree removal between these dates is not unlawful, but should be preceded by mist-net and acoustic surveys to avoid felling any trees currently in use by Northern Long-Eared Bats. Felling such trees while they are in use by the bats is a violation of both state and federal statutes. Northern Long-Eared Bats may roost in trees as small as three inches diameter-at-breast-height (dbh).

No records of state-listed endangered species occur along the power line route except near the proposed Pana Substation. Relatively recent records of the **Franklin's Ground Squirrel**, *Spermophilus*

(Poliocitellus) franklinii, occur along the Lincoln Prairie Trail, a former railway which parallels Route 29, at points just northwest of Pana.

In June 2009, a road-kill was recovered from the highway, and later that month two IDNR biologists traveling to Springfield observed a Franklin's Ground Squirrel scampering across the highway. These events indicate the presence of a colony, whose members may use habitat on both sides of the highway.

These observations were not the result of any intentional survey effort, and to the Department's knowledge no purposeful assessment of this population has ever been carried out. (The Trail predates the species' listing.) It may still persist in the area, while the extent of occupied terrain is unknown.

While the "best" habitat for this species exists along the Lincoln Prairie Trail, which extends from Pana all the way to Taylorville, this species drives its juveniles away from parental territories. Near Champaign, juveniles have been shown, through radio-tracking, to disperse up to two miles from natal burrows. Such a range places the proposed Pana Substation and the portion of the proposed route north of Pana well-within reach of dispersing Squirrels, so that any suitable or marginal habitat in the area may be occupied by this species.

Most burrows are established within a few yards of a tree or shrub, but where those are absent, wooden power poles appear to offer a suitable substitute…near Champaign burrows often appear clustered near power poles, but tend to be sparsely distributed between them. The proposed substation site is already the junction for several major power lines, so that the agricultural fields in Sections 8 and 9 are peppered with numerous pole installations. It is possible that occupied burrows exist near such poles, especially near roadways and field edges.

The Department recommends late May/early June trapping surveys at and in the vicinity of the proposed Pana Substation to identify the extent of Franklin's Ground Squirrel occupation and evaluate the size of the local population. The survey should include the areas along the Lincoln Prairie Trail across from the proposed facility and for a quarter-mile in each direction.

If this species is present, construction planning should entail measures to dissuade (or, at least, to not encourage) colonization of the Substation by this species. For example, the species is known for its propensity to colonize topsoil stockpiles left in place for sufficient time to sprout plant cover. However, if the species is found to be present within the footprint of the proposed substation, or near power poles that will have to be removed or replaced, consideration should be given to seeking an Incidental Take Authorization from the Department pursuant to the *Illinois Endangered Species Protection Act* [520 ILCE 10/5.5]. If permanent landscaping is required for the facility, an opportunity may exist to provide habitat for this species within the Substation, unless it is thought to offer a threat to system reliability.

Illinois Natural Area Inventory (INAI) Sites. There are no designated INAI Sites along the approved route.

State Parks. Spitler Woods State Park, which is also dedicated as the **Spitler Woods Nature Preserve and INAI Site,** is located more than three miles north of the Faraday Substation. The Substation is expected to have no effect on the State Park or its visitors.

Forest or Grassland Blocks. There are no significant forest blocks or grasslands in the vicinity.

Wetland Resources. Small wetlands are scattered along the approved route, most of which are "farmed wetlands." An exception is found where the route crossed the Flat Branch south of Moweaqua. Appropriate authorization from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers may be required for this section of the project.

The Department of Natural Resources appreciates this opportunity to comment on the potential wildlife issues facing this project. Should there be any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Keith M. Shank
Division of Ecosystems and Environment
keith.shank@illinois.gov
(217) 785-5500