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Agriculture

Forest  
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**File Code:** 1950

**Date:** July 2, 2008

Greetings,

NorthWestern Energy (NWE) is proposing to construct and operate a natural gas pipeline on the Hungry Horse Ranger District. This proposal is called the "KalisPELL Line Valve 5 to 6 Loop Natural Gas Pipeline Project." The project is outlined in the following paragraphs and I've described the process we will be conducting to consider this proposal.

Flathead National Forest staff members and the district planning team, comprised of specialists from many natural resource disciplines, have conducted a preliminary analysis of the proposal by NWE. As a result of this initial assessment, Cathy Barbouletos, the Forest Supervisor, has determined that an EIS is warranted to consider the overall effects of the proposed pipeline construction. A Notice of Intent to prepare an environmental impact statement has been submitted to the Federal Register for publication.

### **The Proposed Action**

NorthWestern Energy's proposal includes construction and the long-term operation and maintenance of approximately 12 miles of 12-inch diameter steel pipe from an existing natural gas valve station near Marias Pass on the Continental Divide westward to another existing valve station near the junction of Bear Creek and the Middle Fork Flathead River. Approximately 11 miles of the new pipeline would be on National Forest System land and one mile would be on private lands in the Snowslip/Gieffer Creek area. The project area is approximately 25 miles SW of Browning, Montana and approximately 50 highway miles SE of Columbia Falls, Montana (please refer to the attached project map).

The new loop pipeline would be installed underground and generally parallel to an existing 10-inch diameter natural gas pipeline that is currently authorized under a special use permit (SUP) to NWE. NWE would attempt to build the new pipeline as close as feasibly and technically possible to the existing line, but may have to diverge in some locations due to terrain, the BNSF railroad tracks, Highway 2, environmental concerns, other utilities, engineering needs, or other technical factors. A portion of the new pipeline may need to be constructed in an inventoried roadless area due to a combination of these factors.

The authorized right-of-way (ROW) for the existing pipeline in this area is 50 feet wide. The proposed action would require up to an additional temporary 50-foot wide working ROW to construct the new pipeline, with a final 50-80 foot total long-term operational ROW. The proposed action would, wherever possible, utilize the existing cleared, authorized 50-foot ROW to minimize the amount of new vegetation clearing and to combine maintenance access points. Pipeline operations require that the ROW remain free of heavy tree cover. Within the ROW, native forbs and shrubs would be maintained for the lifespan of the pipeline. Noxious weeds would be



monitored and abated throughout the lifespan of the authorized use. The total new area affected for the 11-miles of ROW on National Forest land would be less than approximately 70 acres.

Underground installation would be conducted to comply with Department of Transportation (49 CFR 192.327) and NWE standards. Pipeline burial depths would allow for 42 inches of soil cover in normal soil, 60 inches at stream crossings, and 48 inches near public roads and railroads. Bedrock installations would be covered to a depth of 30 inches.

Areas of temporary disturbance would include temporary use areas for equipment and materials staging and construction access routes. Some of these would be on private lands. Native grasses and herbaceous plants would be restored in all areas where ground disturbance or vegetation removal occurs. Revegetation progress would be monitored for two growing seasons or until 80% native cover is achieved.

Two shed-sized structures and three above-ground pipe assemblies would be constructed at the valve station at the west end of the proposed project area. Federal pipeline inspection rules would require long-term motorized and non-motorized maintenance access at selected points along the pipeline route.

Construction of the loop pipeline would take approximately 90 to 120 days, depending on fire restrictions and other unforeseen delays. After construction, NWE would utilize both the new 12-inch diameter pipeline and the existing 10-inch diameter pipeline, with the pipelines interconnecting at the valve stations to create a 'loop system.'

### **Purpose and Need**

NWE has stated that the purpose and need for this project is to increase capacity and supply and to maintain reliable natural gas service to the Kalispell and Flathead Valley area. The existing pipeline is the Flathead Valley's only source of natural gas. The integrity of the existing pipeline, constructed in 1962, is good, but NWE projects that its capacity will be reached within two years due to the continuing strong population growth in the Flathead Valley area. During the past several years, the demand for natural gas has increased in western Montana as a result of steady population and economic growth.

### **Preliminary Issues**

Preliminary issues and concerns that will likely be evaluated in the EIS include potential effects of the proposed action related to the following: threatened or endangered species such as the grizzly bear, lynx, and bull trout; inventoried roadless areas; motorized access; noxious weeds; wetlands; scenic qualities; and sensitive plant and animal species.

### **Possible Alternatives**

Alternative 1 will be the no-action alternative. Alternative 2, the proposed action described above, was developed by NWE to respond to the purpose and need and may be modified for the draft EIS upon consideration of field engineering studies during the summer of 2008. A route that does not enter inventoried roadless areas may also be included in another alternative. Other viable alternatives may be developed by modifying the proposed action to respond to significant issues identified during the public involvement and scoping process.

### **Decision Process**

The Responsible Official for this decision is Cathy Barbouletos, Forest Supervisor of the Flathead National Forest. She will decide whether to authorize the construction and long-term operation of the new loop pipeline, as well as related decisions that may address ancillary activities such as weed control and vegetation monitoring on the pipeline ROW, access to the pipeline ROW, etc.

A draft EIS (DEIS) is expected to be filed with the Environmental Protection Agency and made available for public review in October 2008. When the DEIS is available a Notice of Availability will be published in the Federal Register. The final EIS (FEIS) is expected to be published in February 2009. The decision and rationale for the decision will be documented in a Record of Decision (ROD).

The Forest Supervisor will make decisions regarding this proposed project only for National Forest System lands. Her decision will determine whether a construction SUP is issued and the existing permit is amended.

This EIS will tier to the Flathead National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and EIS of January 1986, and its subsequent amendments, which provide overall guidance for land management activities on the Flathead National Forest.

A temporary special use construction permit would be issued to NWE following completion of the FEIS and a ROD approving the pipeline. Following construction planned for summer 2009, the existing SUP would be amended to include the new loop pipeline.

### **Public Involvement Process**

At this time, I'm asking for your comments or concerns about this proposal in order to help the planning team develop a list of issues of concern and the possible development of alternatives.

Your comments about the proposed action are very important. So that your input may be included in our analysis, please provide **specific written comments addressing the proposed action by July 31, 2008**. Specific written comments are defined as those which are within the scope of the proposed action, are explicit to the proposed action, have a direct relationship to the proposed action, and include supporting reasons that the Forest Supervisor should consider in reaching a decision. If you cite literature in your comments, please provide us with a complete bibliography or a copy of the referenced materials if they are not commonly available. Comments received will be available for public inspection and will be considered part of the public record.

Please address your comments to the District Ranger at the above address or fax number. To submit comments electronically, please email them to: comments-northern-flathead-hungry-horse-glacier-view@fs.fed.us with "Kalispell Line Valve 5 to 6 Loop Natural Gas Pipeline Project" in the subject line. Attached documents must be submitted in MS Word (\*.doc), rich text format (\*.rtf), or portable document format (\*.pdf). Hand-delivered comments should be taken to the Hungry Horse Ranger Station between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. To obtain additional information about this project, please contact Project Manager David Ondov (406) 758-5364 or Michele Draggoo at (406) 387-3827.

If you would like to receive future mailings about this project, please either send us your comments on the proposed action or contact us to let us know that you would like to remain on our mailing list. You may also visit the Flathead National Forest internet site for ongoing information on the project at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/flathead/>. Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

JIMMY J. DEHERRERA  
District Ranger

Enclosure - Project Area Map