

**DECISION NOTICE
and
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

**BLUE RIDGE 69kV TRANSMISSION LINE PROJECT
USDA Forest Service
Mogollon Rim Ranger District
Coconino National Forest
Coconino County, Arizona**

BACKGROUND

Arizona Public Service (APS) submitted a proposal to the Forest Service to construct a 69kV Transmission Line and new substation in May 2004. The project affects multiple land jurisdictions both on and off of the Coconino National Forest (CNF). The powerline will begin within the boundaries of the City of Winslow and follow SR87 south towards the CNF boundary for approximately 28 miles. The powerline will then enter CNF lands and travel another 11 miles to a substation. Refer to the attached location map.

Need For the Project

The purpose and need for this action is to identify a suitable corridor for the proposed facilities on CNF lands, in order to facilitate the completion of this proposed project, and to meet the management needs and requirements set forth in the Coconino National Forest Plan. An environmental analysis has been completed in accordance with the Coconino National Forest Plan disclosing the effects of constructing and maintaining the corridor.

Arizona Public Service (APS) is the electric power supplier to the communities of Happy Jack and Blue Ridge located in Coconino County, Arizona. The Blue Ridge area has evolved from a few houses scattered on private land in-holdings within the Coconino National Forest (CNF) into an area with large residential subdivisions. APS serves approximately 1,200 customers in the Blue Ridge area, and expects their customer base to exceed 2,000 households over the next five years. The electric power needs of APS' customers have increased to a point that additional electric transmission facilities are required to ensure reliability and provide for the projected growth in the Blue Ridge area.

Presently, the only source of power to communities in the Blue Ridge area is a single 21kV radial distribution line. This line was constructed in the 1950s and extends approximately 35 miles from its present source at the Tonto Substation in Payson through heavily forested, mountainous terrain. Because of the radial configuration of the existing line (single line into the area), any outage occurring on the line will cause a total blackout of the Blue Ridge communities. This existing line is subject to storm-related outages, such as wind, lightning, and trees falling on power lines. This also has contributed to voltage spiking and subsequent damage of personal electronic equipment. Since the existing line is situated in a remote location that can be difficult to access for repairs, the duration of outages has been up to 5 days in the Blue Ridge area.

The new 69kV transmission line and substation will accomplish the following:

- Increase reliability by extending a new transmission source to Blue Ridge.

- Provide a looped distribution system and improving the ability to restore power in a timely manner in the event of an outage.
- Provide bulk power to the area and replace the existing 21kV distribution line that has reached its capacity with a 69kV powerline.
- Improve power quality in the area by providing a stable voltage source.
- Provide capacity for projected load growth in the Blue Ridge area and develop the 69kV system for meeting long-term needs.

The project will benefit the communities around Blue Ridge, including Clear Creek Pines 1 and 2 and Clint's Well, in addition to strengthening the overall 69kV system in the Winslow area. The environmental assessment documents the analysis of the proposed action to meet this need.

DECISION AND RATIONALE

This decision applies only to those construction activities that are on Coconino National Forest lands within the Mogollon Rim Ranger District.

I have selected **Alternative 2**, authorizing the construction of approximately 11 miles of a 69kV transmission line corridor from the Forest Boundary to the community of Blue Ridge and a 2 acre substation located on CNF lands. APS will be constructing the remainder of the 69kV transmission line between the city of Winslow and the Forest boundary along with a new 69 kilovolt (kV) substation in Winslow as described in the Environmental Assessment (EA). This decision is based upon my review of the information provided through the EA, as well as comments received from the public during the 30-day scoping and official notice and comment period, and internal Forest Service specialists' input.

Alternative 2 includes:

- **Construction of a 69kV Transmission Line and Substation**

Approximately 11 miles of the 69kV transmission line are located on the Coconino National Forest (CNF). Construction will entail pole site clearing and excavation, hole-digging, pole framing and setting, conductor stringing, and revegetation of ground disturbed areas.

Construction of a new substation located on CNF lands in T15N, R12E, Sections 30 and 29, across from the Bly Pit off of SR 87. The substation site will be approximately 2 acres in size including a clear zone around the substation. Geotechnical investigation of subsurface soil conditions will be performed at the substation site. This will involve drilling test holes using a drilling rig. The access road to the substation, less than 400 feet in length, will be improved to an all-weather surface and graded. Drainage will be improved to divert runoff to swales along the substation access road, and improved on adjacent Forest Service roads. This will entail minor maintenance activities including road blading. A larger culvert will be installed on the east side of SR 87, pending coordination with Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT). The existing access gate will be changed from a single gate to a double gate. Graveling the surface with native materials is initially planned. Security fencing will be installed around the substation facilities. The fence will be a 10-foot-tall chain link fence with colored slats.

- **Vegetation Clearing**

Vegetation clearing will be accomplished along the powerline right-of-way, at the substation site and along the substation access road (approximately 55 acres).

- **Timber Harvesting**

A small timber products sale (approximately 50 acres) will be conducted for the removal of trees from the substation site and utility right-of-way between the substation and Quayle Hill (approximately Milepost 32.5) on CNF land. Activities associated with the timber harvest and sale could include cutting, skidding, decking, hauling, and piling or lopping and scattering of slash.

- **Prescribed Burn**

Approximately 1,300 acres of prescribed burning for natural fuels reduction will be completed at the substation-site, lands adjacent to and surrounding the Bly Pit just west of SR 87, lands between State Route (SR) 87 and the utility right-of-way corridor on CNF land. This will protect the powerline infra-structure from being damaged or destroyed by wildland fires. After the prescribed burning is completed, the area will become part of a maintenance program with re-entry for prescribed burning occurring every 5 to 7 years.

- **Staging Areas**

Utilization of two temporary staging area sites each approximately 300 feet by 300 feet in size.

- **Cleanup and Reclamation**

Cleanup and reclamation of disturbed areas by seeding after completion of work with a mix of species that is certified weed-free seed and that is best suited for erosion control.

- **Maintenance**

Maintenance of the right-of-way corridor and area surrounding the substation site, including tree trimming and vegetation clearing as needed to protect the structures.

The transmission line route has been selected to avoid significant impacts to resources. By following existing access roads, strategic placement of pole locations, using helicopters to position poles, and following Forest Service and APS Best Management Practices, resource impacts can be further mitigated. Trees would be cut and removed to facilitate site preparation; however there would be a concerted effort to retain old-growth trees.

Poles will be constructed of self-weathering steel structures and nonspecular conductors for the forested portion of the route, and dulled galvanized steel structures for the grassland portion of the route, in order to reduce visual impacts. To maintain visual quality along SR 87 the substation will be located east of the highway, screened from the view of travelers on SR 87 by existing trees and shrubs. The substation will also use fencing with colored slats to blend in with the surrounding area.

When compared to Alternative 1, the no action alternative, the proposed action will meet the purpose and need for the project by providing a second source of power to the Blue Ridge area, improving power reliability, and providing capacity for projected future growth. Alternative 1, the no action

alternative, would not meet the project purpose and need. The existing line is inadequate to serve the current and projected needs of the area because it is at capacity, its location makes access for repairs difficult, and because it is the only line into the area. These factors make it likely that extended outages and variable voltage would continue to be experienced.

The proposed transmission line and substation are consistent with the management direction and multiple use management framework described in the CNF Plan (1987, as amended).

Mitigation

Mitigation measures required to implement Alternative 2 are outlined in the EA, Chapter 2 – Alternatives, Table 2-1. Mitigation measures include protection of existing archaeological sites and any new sites that are found; minimizing invasive plant spread or introduction of weeds; implementation of Soil and Water Best Management Practices and minimizing visual quality impacts. To minimize potential disturbance impacts to bald eagles within the ponderosa pine habitat, construction activities involving the use of heavy equipment or having the potential to disturb roosting eagles will be confined to between the hours of 0900 and 1600 during the wintering bald eagle season, October 15 through April 1 on CNF lands. There are no mitigation measures relative to Mexican spotted owl since there is a lack of preferred habitat for the owl in the project area and no owls were detected during surveys.

Monitoring

Monitoring required to implement Alternative 2 is outlined in the EA, Chapter 2 – Alternatives. This includes monitoring of archaeological site avoidance during construction. During construction at least two surveys for bald eagles in ponderosa pine habitat will be completed to assure that no bald eagles are actively using the area for roosting. During prescribed burning, the area will be monitored on a daily basis to ensure compliance with prescription and guidelines described in the Project Burn Plan and compliance with ADEQ standards for air quality. Periodic quarterly or monthly evaluations of reclamation areas will be completed by APS and reported to the Forest Service relative to seeding and reseeding effectiveness. Noxious weed monitoring will be completed to ensure that no new noxious weeds have been introduced into the project area primarily in the vicinity of vehicle washing.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND SCOPING

A proposal to construct a new transmission line and substation was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions in June, 2004. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for a 30-day scoping and official notice and comment in June/July 2004. A Notice of the Opportunity to Comment was published in the Arizona Daily Sun on June 11, 2004. As part of the public involvement process, a newsletter was distributed by APS in June 2004, and two public open houses (one in Winslow and one in Blue Ridge) were held in late June 2004 to solicit public comments and suggestions. In each instance, comment forms were provided. A total of 44 comments were received. Most comments were from individuals who reside in either Winslow or the Blue Ridge area.

In addition, an APS project website and telephone information line provided quick access to information and project status. More information about the public involvement efforts can be found in the project record (available for viewing at the Mogollon Rim District Ranger Office).

Using the comments from the public, other agencies, and tribes, the interdisciplinary team identified several issues regarding the effects of the proposed action. Main issues of concern included: 1) visual impacts to Winslow area residents and travelers on SR 87; 2) whether alternative routes or

technologies would be better; 3) potential impacts to the Winslow-Lindbergh Airport airspace and; 4) potential impacts to cultural sites. To address these concerns, the route has been carefully selected to minimize impacts, avoiding cultural sites and large trees to the extent possible. Additionally, mitigation measures and constraints upon the hours that construction can occur in bald eagle habitat during the wintering season have been applied.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Alternatives 1 – No Action and Alternative 2 – Proposed Action were analyzed in detail in the environmental assessment. There were 5 other alternatives that were considered but were eliminated from detailed analysis. These alternatives are summarized below.

Alternative 1 – No Action

Under the No Action alternative, no electric utility improvements would be made. The existing 21kV line would continue to serve the area. Current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area. The Blue Ridge communities would continue to be vulnerable to extended outages, and additional demands on the area electricity grid would further jeopardize power reliability and quality. Under the No-Action Alternative, there would be no ground disturbance or resource impacts from the implementation of the alternative and the purpose and need for the project would not be met.

Alternative 3 – Energy Conservation

Energy conservation is the more efficient use of electricity by customers. Though energy conservation can somewhat reduce energy consumption, this alternative would only forestall the increase in energy demands for a short period of time. Because energy conservation is voluntary on the part of the customer, conservation cannot be relied upon as a means of improving reliability of service. This alternative would fail to meet the purpose and need for the project since it would not improve system reliability (resulting in continued long term outages), or provide consistent increased capacity. For these reasons, this alternative was eliminated from detailed study.

Alternative 4 – Alternative Generating Sources

This alternative proposes the construction of additional generating and transmission facilities. Such facilities would have to be large enough to satisfy current and future load growth projections. The installation and operation costs of a new gas or coal generating facility would be significant and not economically feasible. These facilities would require excessive capital costs, and the environmental impacts associated with developing such facilities as expansive wind or solar fields would outweigh the benefits.

APS has sufficient existing generation to provide for the future electrical loads in the region. For these reasons, an alternative of alternative generating sources was eliminated from detailed study.

Alternative 5 – Alternative Transmission Systems

This alternative considered transmission systems ranging from new lines to the interconnection of existing facilities.

This alternative considered rebuilding the existing 21kV line between Blue Ridge and Payson into a 69kV line. This alternative would provide Blue Ridge with a single radial line, similar to the existing

condition. Capacity for load growth would be increased, but reliability would remain subject to any line outage and it would not meet the purpose and need of a line that could be restored in a timely manner due to its remote location. For these reasons, this was eliminated from detailed study.

A system alternative considered but eliminated included tapping into Western Area Power Administration's (WAPA) 345kV line where it crosses Forest Road 81 east of Lake Mary Road. A new substation would be required at that location, along with a new 69kV transmission line from the substation along Forest Roads 81 and 211 to SR 87. This alternative would not meet the purpose and need for the project as a result of uncertainty with capacity and ability to tap into the 345kV system, and construction and engineering costs associated with a new substation. For these reasons, this alternative was eliminated from further consideration.

Alternative 6 – Alternative Transmission Technologies

Voltages: The project is proposed as a single-circuit 69kV, with a portion of double-circuit 69kV in the Winslow area. Other voltage options are higher – 115kV and up. These higher voltage lines provide bulk transfer capability, but would provide an excessive amount of power needed for the Blue Ridge area. The existing 21kV line to Blue Ridge has reached its capacity. Alternative transmission line voltages would not fulfill the purpose and need of the Proposed Action, and were eliminated from further consideration.

Underground construction: Underground systems typically have been constructed under circumstances of short distances in which overhead lines are not feasible (e.g., in the vicinity of airports, urban centers). Underground line construction is often preferable to overhead lines due to reduced visual impacts after installation. However, the clearing, excavation, and access road construction associated with underground construction will create some visual impacts.

Cost is the key factor in eliminating this alternative. APS' experience shows that costs for an underground 69kV line may run 10 times higher than equivalent overhead lines. Although underground lines are less likely to be affected by weather, maintenance costs are typically greater than the equivalent overhead lines, since outages are more difficult to locate and repair. Underground lines are vulnerable to washouts and incidental excavation. Outages for underground lines could last days or weeks while the problem is being located and repaired. Overhead lines suffer outages more often, but they can usually be corrected within hours.

For the above reasons, undergrounding the proposed route, or portions of it, was eliminated from further study.

Alternative 7 – Alternative Transmission Line Routes and Substation Sites

Approximately 40 miles of alternative routes were considered but eliminated from further study. The alternative routes generally followed Chavez Pass Road south from the Meteor Crater area to Chavez Pass, and then would turn east to cross Jacks Canyon and SR 87. These routes were not carried forward for reasons including costs to construct an additional substation for interconnection with the existing Cholla-Flagstaff 69kV line north of Interstate 40 (I-40), potential impacts to an inventoried roadless area and threatened species such as Mexican spotted owl habitat in Jacks Canyon, visual impacts to recreation users in Jacks Canyon, potential presence of numerous sensitive cultural sites, including the Chavez Pass Ruins, and construction and maintenance access issues.

An alternative substation site was considered next to the new Blue Ridge fire station, located in Section 5, T14N, R12E. This substation site was located on private land. Issues with this site include siting overhead lines along SR 87 and compliance with Forest Service visual quality objectives for a retention corridor, and proximity to existing residences and subdivisions. For these reasons, this site was eliminated from further study.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

The planning and decision-making process for this project was conducted in accordance with all applicable laws, regulations, policies and plans. This section briefly describes our findings regarding the legal requirements most relevant to this project decision.

National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA)

This decision conforms with the *National Forest Management Act of 1976*, for pinyon pine, juniper and ponderosa pine vegetation treatments and is addressed in the EA, Chapter 3 – Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences.

National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA)

This decision conforms to the *National Environment Policy Act of 1969*, utilizing a systematic, interdisciplinary approach in planning and in decision making which may have an impact on man's environment.

Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act of 1960 and National Forest Management Act of 1976.

Where consistent with other multiple-use goals and objectives there is provision and legal basis for granting easements across National Forest System land, authorizing to grant, issue, or renew rights-of-way over, upon, or through such land for utility corridors, roads, trails, highways, railroads, canals. Easements are granted across National Forest System land when the need for such is consistent with planned uses.

Executive Order 12898 (Environmental Justice)

Implementation of Alternative 2 is not anticipated to cause disproportionate adverse human health or environmental effects to minority or low-income populations.

FEDERAL and STATE PERMITS

Clean Air Act of 1970 (as amended)

Prior to the ignition of any prescribed fires, approval from the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ) will be obtained to ensure the air quality standards for emissions and/or pollution are not exceeded.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)

I have reviewed the Environmental Assessment for this project using criteria identified in implementing regulations for the National Environmental Policy Act (40 CFR 1508.27).

Context

I have determined that Alternative 2 is a site-specific action that by itself does not have international, national, region-wide or statewide importance. The discussion of the significance criteria that follows applies to the intended actions and is within the context of local importance in the area associated with the Mogollon Rim Ranger District.

Intensity

The following discussion is organized around criteria described in the National Policy Act (NEPA) regulations (40 CFE 1508.27).

Beneficial and Adverse Impacts

The physical and biological effects are confined to the immediate area of the Forest Service lands between SR87 and the identified Right of Way utility corridor and substation.

This action will avoid any impacts of significant intensity. Implementation of mitigation measures will minimize impacts (EA-Chapter 2). There may be short-term minor traffic effects on State Highway 87 as construction progresses due to increased heavy equipment use in the area. Also, there will be short-term soil displacement as the area is cleared and the site prepared, however, required mitigation measures will minimize these effects.

The long-term effects are considered to be beneficial in terms of increased power supply and reliability for the communities of Blue Ridge, Clear Creek Pines Units 1 and 2 and Clint's Well, in addition to strengthening the overall 69kV system in the Winslow area.

Public Health and Safety

Given the current and expected numbers of people who may be recreating and traveling in the area and the mitigation measures prescribed to reduce potential conflicts, there are no known adverse impacts to public health and safety. During construction, traffic caution signs will be posted at critical locations along State Highway 87.

Unique Characteristics

There are no unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to any historic sites, parklands, prime farm land, wetlands, or ecologically critical areas that would be adversely affected.

Controversy

The public generally supports the project and understands the project need. The environmental effects of this action are widely understood and are not considered controversial among resource specialists. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial.

Uncertainly and Risk

The actions also do not involve unique or unknown risks, nor are the environmental effects highly uncertain. The activities are typical of past activities on the Forest. To the best of my knowledge, the effects of activities are known and have been addressed in the environmental assessment.

Precedent

These site-specific actions do not establish a precedent for future actions, which may have significant effects; nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration. Future actions will be evaluated through the NEPA process and will stand on their own as to the environmental effects and project feasibility.

Cumulative Effects

The potential direct and indirect environmental effects of Alternative 2 relative to the past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions would not result in any significant cumulative effects on the resource to the project area, region or Nation. Cumulative effects are addressed in the EA – Chapter 3.

Significant Scientific, Cultural or Historic Resources

This decision complies with the *National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966, (as amended)*, *the Archeological Resource Protection Act of 1979* and *the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978*.

This decision will not contribute to the loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources. A cultural resources survey and report is complete and available for review in the Project Record. The survey identified and documented 26 newly recorded sites, 67 isolated artifacts, 12 isolated features, 82 isolated artifact scatters, and revisited 11 previously recorded sites and historic features. Direct impacts to all the sites can be avoided through mitigation measures. It is possible that additional resources not previously identified may be found during construction. Should this happen, work would stop immediately pending notification of the District Ranger and Forest Archaeologist, and documentation would need to be completed before any additional work was conducted. A ‘No Effect’ on cultural resources was determined for this project. The cultural resources clearance has been completed and a ‘No Effect’ on cultural resources was determined.

Threatened and Endangered Species

This decision complies with the *Endangered Species Act 1973 and all amendments* and incorporates appropriate Forest Plan guidelines for the habitat needs of the bald eagle and Mexican spotted owl. This decision will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species of plants or animals or habitat critical for the management of these species. This action does not violate Federal, State, or local laws imposed for the protection of the environment. A biological assessment and evaluation has been completed. Request for informal consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service resulted in a concurrence with the Forest Service’s determination that the proposed action may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect either of the listed species, bald eagle or Mexican spotted owl.

The Environmental Assessment disclosed Forest-wide habitat and population trends and analyzed the effects of the proposed action on 9 Management Indicator Species and their habitat and population trends.

I find that implementing of this decision does not constitute a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment in either context or intensity. I have made this determination after considering both positive and negative effects, as well as direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of this action and foreseeable future actions and therefore does not require the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement.

Federal, State and Local Laws

Implementing Alternative 2 does not threaten nor is it in violation of Federal, State or local laws, or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

Consistency

The *Coconino National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan 1987 (as amended)* provides for a multiple use management framework in which special uses are administered “to best meet public needs” (CNF 1987). The proposed project complies with standards and guidelines specified in the Forest Plan that are applicable to this type of use. This includes compliance with the Forest Plan Standard and Guidelines for visual quality by locating the powerline away from the influence of SR87 along an existing road corridor minimizing the affects to visual quality and eliminating the need to pioneer a powerline across undisturbed Forest lands; and it maintains the integrity of ponderosa pine stringers for the benefit of wildlife and Threatened and Endangered Species.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This project will not be implemented sooner than five business days following the close of the appeal filing period established in the Decision Notice. If an appeal is filed, implementation will not begin sooner than 15 calendar days following a final decision on the appeal. APS plans to complete construction of the project by spring/summer 2006.

RIGHT TO APPEAL OR ADMINSTRATIVE REVIEW

This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal). Individuals or organizations that submitted comments during the official notice and comment period may appeal this decision.

A written notice of appeal, clearly stating it is a Notice of Appeal being filed pursuant to 36 CFR 215.7 shall be filed within 45 days of the date of publication of legal notice of this decision in the newspaper of record, the *Arizona Daily Sun*. The publication date in the *Arizona Daily Sun*, is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal, 36 CFR 215.7. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Written appeals must be filed with the Appeal Deciding Officer:

**Regional Forester
Southwestern Region
333 Broadway, S. E.
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87102**

In accordance with 36 CFR Section 215.14, it is the responsibility of those who appeal a decision to provide the Appeal Deciding Officer sufficient evidence and rationale to show why the Responsible Official’s decision should be remanded or reversed. The written notice of appeal must meet the following requirements:

- State that the document is a Notice of Appeal filed pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215.
- List the name, address and telephone number of the appellant.
- Identify the decision document by title and subject, date of decision, and name and title of the Responsible Official.
- Identify the specific change(s) in the decision that the appellant seeks or portion of the decision to which the appellant objects.

- State how the Responsible Official's decision fails to consider comments previously provided either before or during the comment period specified in 36 CFR 215.6 and, if applicable, how the appellant believes the decision violates law, regulation, or policy.

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered appeal are: 0800 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays. An appeal, plus attachments, can also be filed regular mail, fax, e-mail, hand-delivered, express delivery or messenger service. Electronic appeals must be submitted in a format such as an e-mail message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), Adobe (.pdf), and Word (.doc) to appeals-southwestern-regional-office@fs.fed.us Appeals must have an identifiable name attached to it. Verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic appeals. When using the electronic mailbox, you will receive an automated reply if the message is received. If you do not receive this automated reply, it is the responsibility of the appellant to ensure the appeal is received by the deadline (36 CFR 215.6).

CONTACT PERSON

For more information concerning this decision, please contact Carol J. Holland, Analysis Group Leader, Mogollon Rim Ranger District, HC 31 Box 300, Happy Jack Arizona 86024, (928) 477-2255.

for /S/ Joseph P. Stringer _____
Nora B. Rasure
Forest Supervisor
Coconino National Forest

04/26/05
Date

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