

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR OTERO COUNTY ELECTRIC
COOPERATIVE TRANSMISSION LINE
U.S. FOREST SERVICE
LINCOLN NATIONAL FOREST
SMOKEY BEAR RANGER DISTRICT
LINCOLN COUNTY, NEW MEXICO

The significance of environmental impacts must be considered in terms of context and intensity. This means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human and national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. In the case of a site-specific action, significance usually depends upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Intensity refers to the severity or degree of impact. (40 CFR 1508.27)

CONTEXT

The Otero County Electric Cooperative Transmission Line project area is located in the Smokey Bear Ranger District of the Lincoln National Forest in Lincoln County, New Mexico. The project area begins in Ruidoso Downs and continues north and west, ending east of Alto, New Mexico. The project consists of the construction of approximately 9 miles of new electric transmission line and a new substation near Alto. Poles for the transmission line will be approximately 80 feet in height. The substation would cover up to 2 acres of a 5 acre site. The project is approximately 9 miles long crossing Forest Service and private lands. A total of up to 60 acres will be disturbed by project activities, with 24 acres of disturbance occurring on Forest Service lands and 36 acres of disturbance occurring on private lands.

The current Biscuit Hill substation serving the area is overloaded as a result of area population growth. Overload of the substation has led to power outages and unsafe conditions for area residents and businesses. There is a need to supplement area electrical service in order to ensure reliability and redundancy of the power supply in the area. The project should reduce the current overloading of the Biscuit Hill substation and have sufficient space to expand electrical service in the future to accommodate projected area growth.

The effects from the proposed action will directly affect those persons living, working and recreating within and adjacent to the project area, as well as residents and businesses in Ruidoso Downs and Alto. Effects will be either beneficial or adverse, depending on the points of view of the persons affected.

The Forest Service action for the proposed project is approval of a right-of-way lease for the transmission line through Forest Service lands. The proposed project would fulfill regulatory requirements, accepted policies and agreements. The Energy Policy Act also includes provisions for providing adequately reliable electrical transmission to consumers (Title XII, Electricity) (US

Department of Energy 2005). Reliable electrical transmission throughout the country is based on the enactment of the Energy Policy Act of 2005 (Public Law 109-58). The proposed project addresses the goals and objectives outlined in the Lincoln National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) in responding “to changing conditions of land and other resources and to changing social and economic demands of the American people” (United States Department of Agriculture Forest Service Southwestern Region 1986, page 2) by issuing a right-of-way and authorizing the construction of a 115kV transmission line on National Forest System (NFS) lands.

The effects of the proposed project on the human and natural environment were evaluated in an environmental assessment.

INTENSITY

The intensity of effects was considered in terms of the following:

1. **Impacts may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that, on balance, the effect will be beneficial.** Consideration of the intensity of environmental effects is not biased by beneficial effects of the action.
2. **The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.** There will be no significant effects on public health and safety because the project reduces the risk of overloading of the area electrical system which led to power surges and power outages (See EA page 6).
3. **Unique characteristics of the geographic area, such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.** There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area, because there are no historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wild and scenic rivers, ecologically critical areas to be affected. Wetlands and floodplains associated with waterways will be avoided by project activities by spanning waterways (See EA pages 14-21).
4. **The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.** The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. There is no known credible scientific controversy over the impacts of the proposed action. No uncertainty on the potential effects to any resource was presented and there are no extraordinary circumstances (36 CFR.220.6(2)(b)) associated with the project that cannot be mitigated or avoided to minimize impacts.
5. **The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.** The Agency has considerable experience with actions like the one proposed. The analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk (See EA Chapter 3).
6. **The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.** The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects,

because other electrical transmission lines currently exist on Forest Service lands to provide necessary electrical service to populated areas. Any future proposals that alter the project area or any other areas of the National Forest will be evaluated through the National Environmental Policy Act process, consistent with current laws and regulations. (See EA pages 1 and 6).

7. **Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.** The cumulative impacts are not significant. Two major wildfires occurred in the project vicinity in 2000 and 2011. Both fires have reduced the number of trees and amount of vegetation in the project area, affecting the amount and quality of habitat available for nesting birds, small mammals, and forage available to ungulates in the area in the area. For construction of the proposed project, vegetation and tree removal would occur, further increasing the amount of bare ground within the project area by 60 acres. While this would compound the loss of nest sites and food sources in the general area resulting from the wildfires described above, the 60 acre impact from the project is insignificant in comparison to the total approximately 15,000 acre loss due to fire (See EA page 27).
8. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed , or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.** The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, because there are no cultural resources present within the project area. The action will also not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources because those resources are not present within the area of potential affect. The project is in compliance with the protocol specified in the programmatic agreement with the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). The archaeological clearance report was completed and the SHPO concurred with a finding of “No Historic Properties Affected” (See EA page 17).
9. **The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.** The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973, because no federally-listed species or species that appear on the Region 3 sensitive species list were found to occur within the project area during the biological resources survey. No suitable habitat for endangered or threatened species occurs within the project area. No habitat determined to be critical occurs within the project area (See EA pages 17-21)
10. Whether the action threatens to violate Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA (see EA pages Chapter 3). The action is consistent with the Lincoln National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. The project is consistent with the agency mission of human and community development and facilities within the forest. While focusing on the need to maintain forest sustainability,

the plan also emphasizes the need to consider “[m]anagement of National Forest system lands in a manner that is sensitive to economic efficiency; and responsiveness...to changing social and economic demands of the American people (See EA pages 1 and 6)

After considering the effects of the actions analyzed, in terms of context and intensity, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.



5/29/13

David Warnack

Date

District Ranger, Smokey Bear Ranger District, Lincoln National Forest

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