

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

**Columbia County Solar Project
Columbia County, Florida**

**Rural Utilities Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture**

Florida Renewable Partners

**Prepared by:
Engineering and Environmental Staff
Rural Utilities Service**

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A. INTRODUCTION

Florida Renewable Partners (FRP) plans to submit a financing request to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Utilities Service (RUS) to construct the proposed Columbia County Solar Project (Project) in Columbia County, Florida. RUS is considering this financing request. Prior to taking a federal action (i.e., providing financial assistance), RUS is required to complete an environmental impact analysis in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) (U.S.C. 4231 et seq.), the Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) regulations for implementing NEPA (40 CFR Parts 1500-1508), and RD's NEPA implementing regulations, Environmental Policies and Procedures (7 CFR Part 1970). After completing an independent analysis of an environmental report prepared by FRP and its consultant, RUS concurred with its scope and content. In accordance with 7 CFR § 1970.102, RUS adopted the report and issued it as the Agency's Environmental Assessment (EA) for the proposed Project. RUS finds that the EA is consistent with federal regulations and meets the standards for an adequate assessment. FRP published a newspaper notice, announcing the availability of the EA for public review, in accordance with 7 CFR § 1970.102. In addition, RUS considers the proposed Project an undertaking subject to review under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), 16 USC 470(f), and its implementing regulation, "Protection of Historic Properties" (36 CFR Part 800).

B. PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE/NEED

The overall purpose of the Project is to generate 74.5 megawatts (MWs) of clean, renewable electricity, and to provide reliable, low cost, renewable electricity to rural electric customers. The electricity generated onsite will be delivered to the offsite electrical grid via a 230-kilovolt (kV) overhead interconnection to the Duke Energy Florida (DEF) transmission system.

RUS has reviewed the purpose and need for the Project and determined that the proposal will meet the present and future needs of FRP.

C. ALTERNATIVES EVALUATED

1. No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, RUS would not provide financial assistance to FRP, and/or the proposed Project would not be constructed. This alternative would not assist FRP in providing reliable, low cost, renewable electric service to customers in this service territory, therefore failing to meet the increasing demand for electricity with renewable energy generation.

2. Action Alternative (Preferred Alternative)

Under the Action Alternative, RUS would consider financing the proposed Project, and FRP would construct Columbia County Solar Project. The proposed Project would comprise approximately 455 fenced acres and provide renewable electric service to rural customers. Construction components would include photovoltaic solar arrays, collector yard, inverters, transformers, at-grade access pathways, collector lines, 1-mile gen-tie line, and security fencing.

3. Alternatives Eliminated from Further Consideration

In addition to the No Action Alternative and Action Alternative, FRP considered other technology and siting alternatives, which are documented in the Alternatives Evaluated section of the EA.

D. SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

The analyses in the EA documented that the proposed Project would have no adverse effects to existing land use, floodplains, wetlands, cultural resources, threatened and endangered species, water resources, coastal resources, the surrounding community, air quality, noise, transportation, aesthetics, or human health and safety. A summary of anticipated impacts on the human environment is provided below, including any mitigation measures deemed necessary to avoid or minimize impacts. FRP is responsible for implementing these measures.

There will be temporary impacts to one state-listed wildlife species, the gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*). Approximately 577 acres of suitable gopher tortoise habitat were identified within the Project boundary during the 43% gopher tortoise survey that was conducted in June 2019 according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Gopher Tortoise Permitting Guidelines. A total of 645 burrows were identified within the Project boundary. Prior to construction, a 100% burrow survey will be conducted to support the submittal of a FWC gopher tortoise Conservation Relocation Permit application. All burrows within 25 feet of the construction footprint will be excavated and captured tortoises safely relocated to an FWC-approved recipient site.

E. PUBLIC AND AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

A local newspaper advertisement announcing the availability of the EA and participation under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, was published on February 14, 15, and 16, 2023, in the Lake City Reporter, Columbia County, Florida. A copy of the EA was available for public review at:

<https://www.rd.usda.gov/resources/environmental-studies/assessments>.

The 14-day comment period ended on February 28, 2023. RUS received no comments.

F. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on its EA, RUS has concluded that the proposed Project would have no significant effects to existing land use, floodplains, wetlands, cultural resources, threatened and endangered species, water resources, coastal resources, the surrounding community, air quality, noise, transportation, aesthetics, or human health and safety. The proposed Project will have no effects on historic properties listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and no effects to federally listed species or designated critical habitat. The proposed Project would not disproportionately affect minority or low-income populations.

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, as amended (42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq.), the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations (40 CFR 1500–1508), and RD's Environmental Policies and Procedures (7 CFR Part 1970), RUS has determined that the environmental impacts of the proposed Project have been adequately addressed and that no significant impacts to the quality of the human environment would result from construction and operation of the proposed Project. Any final action by RUS related to the proposed Project will be subject to, and contingent upon, compliance with all relevant federal and state environmental laws and regulations. Because RUS's action will not result in significant impacts

to the quality of the human environment, RUS will not prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for its potential federal action associated with the proposed Project.

G. RUS LOAN REVIEW AND RIGHT OF ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW

This FONSI is not a decision on a loan application and therefore not an approval of the expenditure of federal funds. Issuance of the FONSI and its notices concludes RUS's environmental review process. The ultimate decision on loan approval depends upon conclusion of this environmental review process in addition to financial and engineering reviews. Issuance of the FONSI and publication of notices will allow for these reviews to proceed. The decision to provide financial assistance also is subject to the availability of loan funds for the designated purpose in RUS's budget. There are no provisions to appeal this decision (i.e., issuance of a FONSI). Legal challenges to the FONSI may be filed in Federal District Court under the Administrative Procedures Act.

H. APPROVAL

This Finding of No Significant Impact is effective upon signature.

CHRISTOPHER MCLEAN

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USDA Rural Development

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For additional information on this FONSI and EA, please contact Robert Deems, Environmental Protection Specialist, USDA Rural Development, Rural Utilities Service, by email at Robert.Deems@usda.gov.