

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

**Grand Canyon West 69kV Interconnection Project
DOI-BLM-AZ-C010-2021-0020-EA
AZA 037402 (69kV power line)
AZA 037402A (temporary construction areas)
AZA 038310 (fiber-optic line)
Mohave County, Arizona**

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

Hualapai Tribal Utility Authority, Hualapai Tribe

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

October 2022

A. INTRODUCTION

The Hualapai Tribal Utility Authority on behalf of the Hualapai Tribe (HTUA) submitted an application for a High Energy Cost Grant (HECG) to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Utilities Service (RUS) to construct the proposed Grand Canyon West (GCW) 69kV Interconnection Project (Project) in Mohave County, Arizona. 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 HTUA and the lead federal agency, the Bureau of Land Management, Kingman Office (BLM), and RUS concurred with its scope and content. In accordance with 7 CFR § 1970.102, RUS was a cooperating agency for the jointly issued 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. As lead federal agency, the BLM issued a press release on October 25, 2021. 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 improve electrical and communication services to Grand Canyon West (GCW) to support existing facilities and planned developments. The HTUA, Hualapai Tribe of Peach Springs, Arizona, is a tribally owned and operated electric utility authority authorized by the Hualapai Tribe, a federally recognized Tribe. The HTUA, an institution of Tribal government established in 2014, is charged with the responsibility to oversee the development and management of electrical, water, and sewer utility services at GCW. To meet their future development goals at GCW, the Tribe proposes to bring electricity to GCW from the regional utility grid by constructing a power line across BLM, private, and Tribal lands that would interconnect to the Dolan Springs Substation, operated by UniSource Energy Services (UES). Establishing a connection to the electrical grid would significantly reduce energy costs and carbon emissions. RUS has reviewed the purpose and need for the Project and determined that the proposal will meet the present and future needs of HTUA.

C. ALTERNATIVES EVALUATED

1. No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, RUS would not provide financial assistance to HTUA, and/or the proposed Project would not be constructed. This alternative would not assist HTUA in providing electrical power to the GCW. Electrical power would continue to be provided by diesel generators and telecommunication would continue to rely on microwave towers. The No

Action Alternative would keep electric costs at 40 cents per kilowatt hour (KWh) instead of reducing the cost to 8 cents per KWh, a savings of approximately 2 million dollars per year.

2. Action Alternative (Preferred Alternative)

Under the Action Alternative, RUS would consider financing the proposed Project, and HTUA would construct the Project. The proposed project would involve the construction, operation, and maintenance of an aerial, three-phase, 69kV transmission line, fiber optic line and the 69kV/20.8kV GCW Substation facility, as well as the installation of switching equipment at the Dolan Springs Substation. Approximately 0.93 miles (1.50 km) of the power line and fiber optic line at the northern end of the alignment, south of the existing GCW distribution system tie-in, would be installed underground. The aerial portion of the transmission line would consist of a combination of wood and steel monopole structures, ranging in height from 47.5 to 113.0 feet (14.5 to 34.4 m), supporting three 4/0 aluminum-clad steel reinforced (ACSR) conductors and an optical ground wire (OPGW) cable housing a 48-pair fiber-optic telecommunications line. Switching equipment for the new transmission line, including a 69kV circuit breaker, capacitor bank, and metering facilities, would be installed within the Dolan Springs Substation site or an 0.23 acre (0.09-ha) expansion area adjacent to the site at the southern end of the transmission line alignment. The new GCW Substation would be constructed on a 0.23 acre (0.09-ha) site located next to an existing water storage facility, approximately 4.0 miles (6.4 km) south of the tie-in at the northern end of the transmission line. Two temporary staging areas would be required during construction of the proposed transmission line; the first would encompass approximately 1.0 acre (0.4 ha) located on BLM land, adjacent to the transmission line ROW, at the Antares Road crossing; the second would encompass approximately 2.0 acres (0.8 ha) located at the existing Buck and Doe Road gravel pit on the Hualapai Reservation.

3. Alternatives Eliminated from Further Consideration

In addition to the No Action Alternative and Action Alternative, HTUA considered other technology and siting alternatives, which are documented in Section 2.3, the Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Further Consideration Section of the EA.

D. SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

The analyses in the EA documented that the proposed Project would have no significant impacts to aesthetics/visual resources, land use, soils, floodplains, wetlands, water resources, coastal resources, biological resources, cultural/historic resources, noise, air quality, social impact and environmental justice, transportation, and 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, as summarized in Table 1. HTUA and the BLM are responsible for implementing these measures.

Aesthetics/Visual Resources

The project considers aesthetics as it extends through BLM Visual Resource Management (VRM) Classes II and IV. Short-term effects to visual resources would occur during

construction and maintenance activities. Long-term effects would occur after the powerline is in place. The project design incorporated detailed Resource Protection Measures (RPMs) for each of the poles within VRM Class II. The RPMs were designed to reduce the visual impacts to a level of acceptable change. Based on the visual resource assessment (Appendix E), it was determined that with the incorporation of the design features, including the RPMs, the project would meet the objectives for the VRM designation and impacts would not rise to the level of significance.

Social and Economic Conditions

Short-term socioeconomic effects would occur as construction of the powerline would provide employment opportunities to both Tribal and non-tribal members. Long-term effects would result from the improvement of power and communication services to Grand Canyon West. The improved services and lower costs would increase tourism and support development to the area and to the region as a whole. Increased revenues and personal income from employment opportunities are expected to result in improved services and a higher standard of living for many Tribal members. Both long- and short-term effects to socioeconomic conditions of the region are expected to be beneficial. Long-term effects to the environment would result from the reduced use of generators resulting from the new electric supply from the powerline. These effects are expected to be beneficial.

Wildlife

Short-term effects to wildlife, including special status species, would result from localized construction noise, and temporary disturbance of habitat and forage during construction activities. These effects would be temporary. Long-term effects would result from the removal of approximately 20 acres of vegetation and forage where the powerline would be constructed. With the implementation of the design features, including pre-construction surveys and timing/scheduling of construction activities, impacts to general wildlife would be minimized or avoided and would not rise to the level of significance.

Special Status Species

During construction, short-term impacts to wildlife, including special status species, would include the potential for direct strikes or crushing animal species by equipment and negative biophysical responses (e.g., modification to feeding or reproductive behavior) to increased noise, human activity, and ground vibrations. Activities would also temporarily displace wildlife from the construction area. While these impacts to individuals could be lethal or reduce individual fitness, impacts to the populations of general wildlife are expected to be minor and adverse and would not result in a threat to the species at the population level. With the implementation of the design features, including pre-construction surveys and scheduling of construction activities, impacts to general wildlife would be minimized or avoided.

Vegetation

Short-term effects to vegetation would result from the removal of vegetation during construction activities. Long-term effects would result from the trimming of vegetation to attain the clearance required for the safe operation of the powerline. With the implementation of the design features, including re-seeding, vegetation crushing, and hand-cutting of trees would reduce the impacts to vegetation and the spread of invasive plant species. Impacts to vegetation, both short and long term are not expected to rise to the level of significance.

Table 1 Summary of Effects

Resource	Studies	Effects	Mitigation
Aesthetics	Visual Resource Assessment	Negligible to minor	Reducing vegetation removal, color and material choice
Social and Economic Conditions	U.S. Census Bureau. Census data. Hualapai Tribe's data from 2016 and 2019.	Beneficial, short-term socioeconomic effects of construction and longer term moderate beneficial effects of reduced costs and increased jobs, services and income generating tourism.	Indian Preference in Employment. HTUA will establish minimum goals and timetables for the employment of Indians that will be applicable to employers associated with the Proposed Action.
General Wildlife	Field Surveys and Biological Assessment and Evaluation	No long term adverse impact on most general wildlife species	Constructing outside nesting season would minimize effects.
Special Status Species	Field Surveys and Biological Assessment	No long-term effects. Minor, short-term effects may result from localized construction noise and increase in human presence for several months.	Raptor-safe design elements, covering holes and trenches overnight to prevent entrapment, and avoiding active nest sites.
Vegetation	Field Surveys and Biological Assessment	Minor impacts to a limited area where vegetation is removed and kept clear for safe operation of the transmission line. Other areas will recover within 1 year.	Implementation of hand digging poles in steep terrain, hand cutting trees, feathering vegetation, drive and crush, reseeding with native seed mixture, and cleaning vehicles
Air Quality		Direct, short-term, minor effect and long term beneficial effect	Reduction of diesel generator operation
Cultural & Historic Resources	Class III survey	No adverse effect	Implementation of post-review (inadvertent) discovery protocols

Air Quality

Design features for fugitive dust control, such as the watering of disturbed areas by a spray bar-equipped water truck, have been incorporated into the project as necessary to comply with State requirements, local ordinances, and/or other jurisdictional agency requirements. In addition, the existing diesel generators powering operations at GCW would be used only for backup power supply. This would reduce diesel usage by 1,000 gallons per day (365,000 gallons per year) and reduce soot and particulates emissions in a Class I airshed.

Cultural Resources & Historic Properties

Class III surveys of the project area were conducted in December 2018 and January, March, and November 2019, to determine what, if any, cultural resources would be impacted by the

implementation of the proposed action (Lyon et al. 2019). The survey identified 10 archaeological sites and 53 isolated occurrences along the Tenney Ranch Road alignment. All sites are prehistoric artifact scatters, and all were recommended as Eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion D based on their potential to provide important information on the prehistory of the Grand Wash Cliffs area. Wherever feasible, these sites would be preserved in place and avoided during construction and maintenance of the proposed power line. With the avoidance of the sites, implementation of the Proposed Action would have no adverse effect on cultural resources or Native American concerns.

RUS is requiring implementation of a Post-Review Discovery Plan (Inadvertent Discovery Plan) prior to and during construction as agreed upon by RUS and the Hualapai Tribe. Post-review discoveries on federal or tribal lands will follow federal and tribal protocols for inadvertent discoveries. This plan applies to all project activities on private lands and include provisions for halting ground disturbance in the vicinity of a post-review discovery, consultation concerning the discovery, assessment of eligibility and effects, and reporting, as appropriate under all relevant cultural resources compliance laws and regulations.

E. PUBLIC AND AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

The BLM, as lead federal agency issued a press release to local media outlets on October 25, 2021 announcing the opening of the public comment period and the availability of the EA which included participation under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. A copy of the EA was available for public review at on the BLM's ePlanning website from October 25, through November 24, 2021. The BLM's press release was emailed to interested stakeholders, including all individuals who participated in scoping. Individuals who did not provide an email address were sent a copy of the press release via U.S. Mail. Local, County, State and Tribal governments, agencies, and non-profits were also notified of the opportunity to comment on the EA. The 30-day comment period ended on November 24, 2021. The lead federal agency, BLM received six comments. A summary of the comments are included in Appendix A.

F. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on the BLM EA, jointly prepared with RUS as a cooperating agency, RUS has concluded that the proposed Project would have no significant effects to land use, floodplains, wetlands, water resources, coastal resources, biological resources, cultural/historic resources, aesthetics, air quality, social impact and environmental justice, noise, transportation, human health and safety, corridors, and soils. The proposed Project will have no adverse effects on historic properties listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and may affect, not likely to adversely affect 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

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT; Grand Canyon West 69kV Interconnection Project, DOI-BLM-AZ-C010-2021-0020-EA, AZA 037402 (69kV power line), AZA 037402A (temporary construction areas), AZA 038310 (fiber-optic line), Mohave County, Arizona.

This Finding of No Significant Impact is effective upon signature.

Dated:

CHRISTOPHER A. McLEAN
Assistant Administrator
Electric Programs
Rural Utilities Service

Contact Person

For additional information on this FONSI and EA, please contact Kristen Bastis, at Kristen.Bastis@usda.gov or 202-692-4910.