FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Lockhart and Harper Solar Project
Hinkley, San Bernardino County, California

Rural Utilities Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Juniper Energy LLC

Prepared by:

Environmental and Engineering Staff
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A. INTRODUCTION

Juniper Energy LLC plans to submit a financing request to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Utilities Service (RUS) to construct the proposed Lockhart and Harper Solar Project (Project) in San Bernardino County, California. RUS is considering this financing request. Prior to taking a federal action (i.e., providing financial assistance), RUS is required to complete an environmental analysis in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) (42 U.S.C. §§ 4231–4347), 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 Juniper Energy LLC and its consultant, RUS concurred with its scope and content. In accordance with 7 CFR § 1970.102, RUS will adopt the report and issue 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. Juniper Energy LLC 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 meet the increasing demand for electricity by the residents and businesses in the Pioneer Energy service territory, covering most of Placer and El Dorado Counties in California, with renewably sourced energy. The Project would allow Pioneer Energy to meet the Renewable Portfolio Standard (RPS) requirement instituted by the State of California as well as Division 25.5 of the California Health and Safety Code. RUS has reviewed the purpose and need for the Project and determined that the proposal will meet the RUS purpose and need.

C. ALTERNATIVES EVALUATED

1. No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, RUS will not provide financial assistance to Juniper Energy LLC, and the proposed Project will not be constructed. This alternative will not assist Juniper Energy LLC in meeting the increasing demand for electricity by the to the residents and businesses in the service territory of Pioneer Energy.

2. Action Alternative (Preferred Alternative)

Under the Action Alternative, RUS will consider financing the proposed Project, and Juniper Energy LLC will construct the Project. The Action Alternative will design and construct two 4MWac solar PV power generating facilities with battery storage capabilities on approximately

73 acres. Arrays of solar modules approximately three to nine feet in height will be arranged in rows spanning on a north-south axis, will cover almost the entire Project Site with a few exceptions. Solar modules mounted to metal beams, which can pivot east to west, will sit atop pile driven supports posts.

Each solar PV generation system would connect to a battery storage system. Each battery storage system would be mounted on one or two pads, which will create approximately 6,000 square feet of impervious surface (a combined 0.27 acres of impervious surface for both projects). The battery storage systems will employ nickel-hydrogen batteries. Power from the modules will connect to the battery system, switchgear and other equipment via electrical wiring laid in 30-inch wide by 42-inch-deep trenches. Pads will be constructed to hold switchgear, inverters, transformers, and the battery system. An interior perimeter all-weather unpaved road will provide access to the system. A water detention basin to collect runoff from a 100-year storm event will be located along the northern border. Security fencing will be installed along the perimeter of the Project Site.

The battery storage system, inverters, medium-voltage transformers, and other electrical equipment will be housed in enclosures throughout the Project Site. The inverter and medium-voltage transformer units would be mounted on concrete foundation pads. All electrical equipment would be either outdoor rated or mounted within electrical enclosures designed specifically for outdoor installation.

Power generated by the PV systems will interconnect to the Southern California Edison (SCE) controlled grid via 33 kilovolt (kV) distribution lines running for approximately 0.25 miles from Harper Lake Road to the Project Site. The PV generation system located on the southern portion of the Project Site would interconnect to a new line, to be constructed by SCE, which would run along a right-of-way controlled by SCE to the southwestern corner of the Project Site. For the PV system located on the northern portion of the Project Site, a new 33kV line would run along Roy Road from the northwestern corner of the Project Site to an interconnection point next to Harper Lake Road. Costs to upgrades the distribution system controlled by SCE would be borne by the Applicant and are part of the funding request. Each distribution line would run above ground for approximately 0.25 miles (the distance from Harper Lake Road to the western border of the Project Site) where they would interconnect to the two respective projects. The lines would be supported by approximately six utility poles, which would range between 30 to 60 feet in height.

3. Alternatives Eliminated from Further Consideration

In addition to the No Action Alternative and Action Alternative, Juniper Energy LLC considered other technology and siting alternatives, which are documented in the Alternatives 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

formally classified lands, wetlands, coastal resources, bald and golden eagles, migratory birds, invasive species, air quality, noise, and transportation. A summary of anticipated impacts on the human environment is provided below, including any mitigation measures deemed necessary to avoid or minimize impacts. Juniper Energy LLC is responsible for implementing these measures.

Land Use and Zoning

The Project Site is located in a Rural Living (RL) zoning district as designated by the San Bernardino County, California Code of Ordinances. The Proposed Action would change the land use from vacant land to a solar facility. The change in land use would not be consistent with a recommendation in the Renewable Energy and Conservation Element of the County General Plan. As a condition of this FONSI, the applicant will obtain a general plan amendment from San Bernadino County, California to change the zoning designation of the Project Site to Resource Conservation (RC), which allows for construction of solar energy facilities. The applicant is currently seeking the amendment from the County. Documentation related to the zoning amendment is provided in Appendix E to the EA.

Important Farmland

Under the Proposed Action, approximately 40 acres of Farmland of Statewide Importance will be converted to non-agricultural use. The NRCS determined the total points for the Proposed Action to be 100. Pursuant to 7 CFR § 658.4 (c)(2), sites that receive a total score of less than 160 need not be given further consideration for protection and no additional sites need to be evaluated. The AD-1006 form completed for the Project is provided in Appendix B to the EA.

Floodplains

A drainage report prepared for the Project Site that determined the site contains areas of shallow flooding (three-foot depths or less) during a 100-year flood event. Because the area was determined to contain a 100-year flood zone, an 8-step analysis was prepared for the Project in accordance with Executive Order 11988. The 8-step analysis is provided in Appendix C of the EA. The report determined that the Project Site could potentially receive peak discharge during a 100-year storm event of approximately 41.34 cubic feet per second (cfs) and that approximately 28,902 cubic feet of storage is required for the change in runoff due to the increase in imperviousness of the proposed site design. The site plan for the Project includes two detention basins, which can retain approximately 29,197 cubic feet of water with a mitigated peak discharge rate of 41.33 cfs. The batteries, electrolyte storage tanks, and critical electrical equipment would be mounted on concrete pads and placed above the 100-year water surface elevation or have secondary containment to avoid potential damage from a flood. The applicant is responsible for implementing all the measures described in the EA and constructing the Project in accordance with all San Bernadino County floodplain development requirements.

Water Resources

A system of braided ephemeral channels flows from the southwest corner to the northeast corner across the Project Site carrying surface flows. The braided channels dissipate within the middle of the Project Site and dissipate off-site prior to reaching Harper Lake. The USACE determined that the streams were not jurisdictional waters of the U.S. subject to regulation of

Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. The battery storage system and related equipment, mounted on equipment pads are considered impervious surface by San Bernadino County, will cover approximately 0.3 acres. The new impervious surface will contribute additional runoff to the combined stream. Approximately 28,902 cubic feet of storage will be required to account for the increase in runoff due to the 6.1 percent increase in imperviousness due to the Proposed Action. To mitigate water quality impacts, the applicant will construct an approximately 29,197 cubic feet would be provided as stormwater storage areas in the form of a shallow detention basin. The applicant is responsible for implementing all the measures described in the EA and constructing the Project in accordance with all San Bernadino County development requirements.

Threatened and Endangered Species

To identify the potential presence of species protected under the Endangered Species Act, an Official Species List was generated using the USFWS Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) consultation tool. IPaC identified one endangered species, two threatened species, and one candidate species as potentially present in the action area: Southwestern Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*), Mojave Desert Tortoise (*Gopherus agassizii*), Western Snowy Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus (nesting)*), and Monarch Butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*). The Proposed Action was determined to have no effect on the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, Western Snowy Plover, and Monarch Butterfly because they are unlikely to occur in the action area. Because suitable habitat for the Mohave Desert Tortoise is present on the Project Site, a protocol level survey was conducted for the species, and none were found to be present. Therefore, the Project was determined to have no effect on the Mojave Desert Tortoise either. Documentation related to threatened and endangered species is provided in Appendix F of the EA.

Cultural Resources

The applicant prepared a Cultural Resources Inventory and Evaluation Report for the Area of Potential Effect (APE) of the Proposed Action. No resources in the APE were determined to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) or the California Register of Historical Resources. RUS submitted a finding of No Historic Properties Affected to the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and seven federally recognized tribes on September 20, 2023. On December 15, 2023, the SHPO responded with no objections. The applicant will implement the requirements of the County of San Bernardino General Plan's Conservation Element, Goal CO-3, in addition to standard protection measures pursuant to 36 CFR § 800.13 to ensure that any unanticipated archaeological resources or human remains are treated properly. The applicant will also ensure archaeological and Tribal monitors will be present during construction to ensure appropriate measures are taken in the event of a post-review discovery.

Aesthetics

The presence of Project components in future views from local roads in the surrounding area are not anticipated to substantially interrupt views to distant hillside and ridgeline terrain the region. New light and glare sources within the Project Site would generally be limited to low-elevation security lighting at the site's ingress/egress gate(s). All lighting installed on the Project Site would be directed downwards and shielded to control illumination of off-site areas

(including nearby residential lands) and reduce skyglow. Solar panels would also be angled such that reflected light from inbound sun rays would be projected at a similar angle and would generally be "above" the typical height of nearby residences and motorists on roads in the immediate surrounding area of the Project Site. The Visual Impact Analysis prepared for the Proposed Action is provided in Appendix G of the EA.

Human Health and Safety

Small amounts of potentially hazardous materials would be used for the Proposed Action such as fuel, lubricants, and cleaning materials. The potential for accidental releases and spills of hazardous materials during construction is a standard risk on all construction sites, and there would be no greater risk for improper handling, transportation, or spills associated with the Project Site's development that would be of a reasonably greater consequence of the Proposed Action than would occur on any other similar construction site. Operational activities will not include handling, storage, or dispensing hazardous or potentially hazardous materials.

Under normal use, the battery storage system is not expected to expose users to hazardous materials. The battery is an "article" pursuant to 29 CFR 1910.1200 and, as such, is not subject to the OSHA Hazard Communication Standard requirement. The batteries have been designed for over 30 years use without rupture. The contents of the battery consist of Nickel dihydroxide, Nickel, Water, Potassium hydroxide and Polytetrafluorethylene.

The construction and long-term operation of the Proposed Action will be in compliance with local, state, and federal hazardous materials laws including the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act and the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act. Requirements in the construction documents will minimize the potential for accidental releases or emissions from hazardous materials.

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 January 8 and 12, 2025, in the Victorville Daily Press (San Bernadino County, California). A hard copy of the EA was also available for public review at the Hinkley Community & Senior Center, 35997 Mountain View Road, Hinkley, CA 92347. The 14-day comment period ended on January 22, 2025. RUS received no comments.

F. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on its EA, RUS has concluded that the proposed Project will have no significant effects to land use, important farmland, floodplains, water resources, biological resources, cultural resources, aesthetics, and 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.

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, as amended, the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations, and RD's Environmental Policies and Procedures, 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 will 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 Finding of No Significant Impact (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 FONSI or the agency's other environmental determinations. 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.

Dated:

CHRISTOPHER MCLEAN Digitally signed by CHRISTOPHER MCLEAN
Date: 2025.04.10 17:40:45 -04'00'

CHRISTOPHER A. MCLEAN Acting Administrator
Electric Programs
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Contact Person

For additional information on this FONSI and EA, please contact Terry Czerwien, Environmental Protection Specialist, by email at: terry.czerwien@usda.gov.