FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

SGS - JEA 230kV Transmission Line Upgrade Project

Clay and Putnam Counties, Florida

Rural Utilities Service

U.S. Department of Agriculture

Prepared by:

Seminole Electric Cooperative, Inc.

For:

Environmental and Historic Preservation

Division

Rural Utilities Service

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A. INTRODUCTION

Seminole Electric Cooperative, Inc. (Seminole) plans to apply for a loan from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Utilities Service (RUS) to replace approximately two-hundred and sixty transmission structures within the approximately 65-mile long Seminole and Jacksonville Electric Authority (JEA) Seminole Plant-Keystone-JEA Firestone 230 kV transmission line in Clay and Putnam Counties, Florida.

RUS will consider this loan application. Prior to taking a federal action (i.e., approving and providing the loan), RUS is required to complete an environmental impact analysis in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) (42 United States Code [USC] 4321 – 4347) and Rural Development's (RD's) NEPA implementing regulations, Environmental Policies and Procedures (7 C.F.R. Part 1970). After completing an independent analysis of an environmental report prepared by Seminole, RUS concurred with its scope and content. In accordance with 7 C.F.R. § 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. Seminole published a newspaper notice announcing the availability of the EA for public review in accordance with 7 C.F.R. § 1970.102. In addition, RUS considers the proposed project an undertaking subject to review under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), (54 USC 306108), and its implementing regulations, "Protection of Historic Properties" (36 C.F.R. Part 800).

A portion of the Project, primarily located along State Highway 21, was identified within Camp Blanding Joint Training Center. Camp Blanding, state land managed by the Florida Department of Military Affairs, was notified of the proposed Project in March 2024 by RUS. Camp Blanding is a cooperating agency and has agreed to accept RUS as the lead agency.

B. PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE/NEED

The proposed Project consists of the replacement of approximately 260 existing Corten steel poles with 260 new galvanized steel poles within an existing, approximately 65-mile 230-kV transmission line right-of-way (ROW). The existing transmission poles, with an average height above ground of 75 ft to 90 feet (ft) and average diameter at ground of 24 inches (in), will be replaced by new transmission poles that match the height and diameter at ground of the existing pole. Each replacement pole will have an approximately 100 ft by 100 ft temporary work area for installation; the approximate total temporary work area is 102.57 acres. All structures will be replaced within 10 ft of the existing structure. There are no borrow areas associated with the proposed project and all staging of equipment and construction materials will be within the temporary work areas.

The transmission line ROW begins at the Seminole Generating Station (SGS) substation adjacent to US Highway 17 north of the City of Palatka, heads west to parallel State Road 100, then northwest through agricultural and rural residential areas to Keystone Heights. From this point the transmission line continues north/northeast along State Road 16 towards Middleburg, turns east to cross Black Creek, and continues northeast towards State Road 23. The right-of-way then turns north, parallel to State Road 23, to reach the interconnection with JEA at the Clay County-Duval County line.

The purpose of this Project to replace the existing structures which are nearing the end of their service lifespan. Replacing these structures will improve the electrical reliability of the SGS-JEA transmission line as well as service to approximately 750,000 Seminole customers in Clay and Putnam Counties who depend on the electricity transmitted along this feed line.

C. ALTERNATIVES EVALUATED

1. No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, RUS would not provide financing to Seminole for the construction of the Project. As a result, Seminole will proceed with the Project irrespective of and even in the absence of RUS financing but at increased cost to its Member cooperatives and their customers. A "no build" scenario in which the existing transmission structures were not replaced would not meet the purpose and need for the Project and would result in unacceptable safety and reliability issues for Seminole customers because of the deteriorating power delivery infrastructure.

2. Action Alternative (Preferred Alternative)

Under the Action Alternative, RUS will consider providing a loan/financing for the Project. The Project will be a pole-for-pole replacement of approximately 260 Corten steel transmission structures with approximately 260 new galvanized steel construction structures along the Seminole SGS-JEA 230-kV transmission line. Access to the existing transmission structures will be from existing roadways adjacent to the ROW and the patrol road within the ROW. Construction is anticipated to require approximately 8-10 months.

3. Alternatives Eliminated from Further Consideration

Due to the nature of the Proposed Action, there are no practicable alternatives with regards to location, as the Project purpose is to replace existing transmission line structures within an existing transmission line ROW.

An alternative to the proposed construction activities would be removing the existing transmission line and routing, permitting, designing, constructing, operating, and maintaining a completely new transmission line alignment. This alternative would create a new linear path through Clay and Putnam Counties. The creation of a new linear path within this area would potentially create new impacts to wetlands, protected wildlife species, vegetation communities, floodplains, conservation areas, community facilities, businesses, residences, cultural resources, and the road network, assuming a new alignment paralleled an existing road. Construction and construction-related activities would potentially require new access roads, clearing and removal of understory and canopy vegetation, potential dredging and filling of state and federal jurisdictional wetlands, and potential impacts to state- and/or federally listed species. In addition, Seminole would need to acquire new easements. This alternative would create new environmental and land use impacts to the surrounding area; therefore, it was determined not feasible or practicable compared to the proposed action or no action. The proposed action is the only practicable course of action to allow for required maintenance of the existing transmission line.

D. SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

The analyses of the proposed Project resulted in no significant adverse effects on land use, floodplains, wetlands, biological resources, water resources, cultural/historic resources, aesthetics, social economics, noise, transportation, and human health and safety. In accordance with the requirements of 7 CFR § 1970.104(b), a summary of anticipated impacts on the human environment is provided below, including any mitigation measures deemed necessary to avoid or minimize impacts. Seminole is responsible for implementing these measures.

Air Quality

Potential impacts to air quality associated with the Project are anticipated to be minimal and temporary in nature, resulting from emissions associated with increased vehicular traffic and construction equipment utilized during construction activities, which are generally low in volume, decrease rapidly with increased distance from the construction site, and are not anticipated to result in long-term impacts to the surrounding areas. In addition, fugitive dust emissions from vehicles will be minimal as BMPs (such as the use of water trucks to tamp down fugitive dust emissions when dictated by weather conditions and enforcement of slow speeds on the ROW by construction crews) will be employed during construction activities to minimize these emissions. Furthermore, electricity transmission does not generate emissions that adversely affect air quality; no air quality impacts will occur with continued use of the transmission line.

General Land Use

The Project is located entirely within the existing Seminole SGS-JEA transmission line, which is part of the overall certified Seminole Plant-Keystone-JEA Firestone transmission line corridor. The SGS-JEA transmission line is operated and maintained as a working electric transmission line and has been designed to eliminate the loss and conversion of existing land cover.

Information pertaining to important farmland, prime forestland, and prime rangeland is not required since the Project is part of an "aerial utility line[s] involving single-pole structures either located in or immediately adjacent to road ROW" [USDA] RUS Bulletin 1794A-600 Section 3.1.2). Therefore, no impacts to prime farmland will occur.

A portion of the Project was identified within one formally classified land, specifically Camp Blanding. Camp Blanding will act as a cooperating agency and has agreed to accept RUS as the lead agency. Since the Project will occur within an existing transmission line right-of-way, with no proposed new permanent impacts, no direct or indirect impacts or loss of formally classified lands will result from construction of the Project.

Floodplains

Approximately 6.77 acres of the Project lies within Flood Zone A and approximately 2.99 acres of the Project lies within Flood Zone AE. These areas represent approximately 9% of the existing transmission line ROW acreage within the Project. There are minimal anticipated impacts to floodplains as a result of the Project. Any potential impacts to floodplains will be temporary and result from foot and vehicular traffic during construction and construction-

related activities. Within wetland areas, temporary matting will be utilized during construction and construction-related activities to avoid potential impacts to these areas. As no permanent wetland impacts are proposed, no permanent impacts to or loss of floodplains will occur as a result of the Project.

Wetlands

Based upon the locations of the approximate wetland boundaries and the preliminary design of the Project, 70 proposed pole replacement locations are located within state and federal jurisdictional wetlands and other surface waters. The Project has been designed to avoid all permanent wetland impacts. Poles will be replaced within 10ft of the existing structure, resulting in no net loss of wetlands and other surface waters. A total of approximately 19.95 acres of temporary wetland impacts are proposed in association with the placement of temporary mats within the work areas where jurisdictional wetlands occur. The proposed temporary wetland impacts will occur mainly within vegetated non-forested wetlands, but also in freshwater marshes, wet prairie, and roadside ditches. If any temporary spoil is displaced within wetlands during the augering of the new pole holes for the pole installation activities, it will be removed prior to completion of work activities. All attempts will be made to displace this spoil onto temporary matting when practicable. No new structure pads or access roads are proposed. No additional clearing of canopy vegetation is required for this work.

Biological Resources - General Fish, Wildlife and Vegetation

Upland habitats within the Project are dominated by electrical power transmission lines (mostly herbaceous, non-forested areas) that are regularly mowed and maintained. Surface water and wetland habitats within the Project include ditches, excavated ponds, vegetated non-forested wetlands, freshwater marshes, wet prairies, and mixed scrub-shrub wetlands. Construction of the Project will not result in the conversion of the existing land use. Therefore, no significant impacts to non-listed wildlife species are anticipated, as they are common within the region and suitable habitat will remain following construction of the Project.

Biological Resources - Listed Threatened and Endangered Species

Species listed as threatened or endangered or proposed for listing under the Endangered Species Act have not been observed within the Project. No impacts to federally listed wildlife species are anticipated, as the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) eastern indigo snake protection measures will be followed during construction activities. No suitable habitat for the Everglades snail kite, red-cockaded woodpecker, Florida scrub-jay, or West Indian manatee is present within the Project. As a result, no impacts to these species will occur. Only marginal habitat is present for the eastern black rail, and only foraging habitat for the wood stork is present within the Project. As the Project will have no permanent wetland impacts, no impacts to either of these species is anticipated.

The state-listed gopher tortoise occurs on site. Potential impacts to gopher tortoises will be addressed through pre-construction surveys and relocation of any gopher tortoises in accordance with Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) requirements. If any Florida pine snakes are observed during construction, activities will cease, and the individuals will be allowed to leave the construction area on their own accord. Any sightings of these species during construction of the Project will be reported to the FWC (including

photographs and/or GPS coordinates if possible), which is the typical mitigation requested by the FWC for potential impacts to the species. If any active Florida sandhill crane nests are identified within the Project area, a 400ft protective buffer will be maintained until the nest is no longer active.

Biological Resources - Bald and Golden Eagles/Migratory Birds

According to the FWC bald eagle nest location database, the closest known nest, CL031, is located approximately 860 feet to the west of the Project and no undocumented bald eagle nests were observed within the Project during wildlife surveys. The Project is located outside of the 660ft protective buffer surrounding the nest; no impact to the bald eagle is anticipated.

Water Resources

Potential impacts to water quantity from the Project are expected to be minimal to nonexistent. No permanent wetland impacts are proposed. Approximately 19.95 acres of temporary wetland impacts will occur and are associated with the placement of temporary mats within the work areas where jurisdictional wetlands occur. Furthermore, installation of the transmission poles will not interfere with navigation, impede the flow of wetlands or other surface waters, or otherwise cause adverse impacts to water quantity in the region or state.

Construction areas will be isolated from adjacent wetlands through installation of staked turbidity screen and/or silt fence along the perimeter, in accordance with best management practices (BMPs) to minimize any erosion or sedimentation outside of the construction area. The Project will be constructed with minimal ground disturbance, resulting in no additional impervious surface since no additional new transmission poles are being proposed – existing transmission poles are only being replaced by new ones. Since BMPs will be utilized and will be installed prior to construction, no direct or indirect adverse impacts to water quality to wetlands or surface waters are anticipated as a result of the proposed activities.

Cultural Resources and Historic Properties

A request for a search of the Florida Master Site File (FMSF) was submitted to the Florida Division of Historic Resources (DHR) on October 16, 2023. The FMSF Cultural Resource Roster contains 20 previously recorded cultural resources. Of the twenty resources, 17 are archaeological sites (two sites are eligible, five are unevaluated, and 11 determined not eligible for the NRHP listing); and 3 resource groups which consist of two linear resources – PU01411 (Georgia Southern + Florida Railroad; not eligible for NRHP listing) and PU01620 (Etoniah Canal; eligible for NRHP listing), and one listed historical district – CL01654 (Gold Head Branch State Park District; listed 2020).

The Project has been designed to avoid five known cultural resources sites along the ROW by requiring no pole installation within the site boundaries. Poles will be installed within 10 feet of the existing structures and the equipment used for installation/removal will be kept outside the cultural resources site boundaries. RUS contacted DHR on October 31, 2024 to review and comment on the proposed Project and FMSF review. On November 13, 2024 DHR responded that the project will have no effect on historic properties listed, or eligible for listing, in the

NRHP; however, any issued permit should include two special conditions regarding unexpected discoveries.

In consideration of potential impacts to historic properties of importance to Native American tribes, the following 6 tribes were identified which may have an interest in being consulted regarding the Proposed Action: Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana, Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, Muscogee (Creek), Poarch Band of Creek, Seminole Nation of Oklahoma, and Seminole Tribe of Florida. These Tribes were notified of the project and invited by RUS to participate in the Section 106 process. Through government to government consultation with RUS, the Seminole Tribe of Florida agreed with the avoidance recommendations and otherwise had no objections or other comments on the Project. No other responses were received by RUS within the 30-day comment period.

Aesthetics

The Project is already an existing transmission line and will remain one following construction activities. The existing Corten steel structures will be replaced with new galvanized steel structures of similar height and diameter. There will be no new infrastructure changed outside of the existing ROW.

Socio-Economic Impacts Assessment

The Project is expected to have a positive regional socioeconomic effect and positively benefit local communities directly affected by the Project, specifically through increased employment opportunities, economic benefit, and tax-based revenue. For instance, the surrounding area businesses should experience increased purchases of goods and services from workers associated with the construction activities, thereby increasing sales at local businesses, and increasing tax-based revenue.

Noise

Noise impacts during construction of the Project would be short-term in duration and limited to daytime hours. The Project would result in negligible changes during the operational phase of the Project when compared with pre-development conditions.

Traffic and Transportation

The additional traffic associated with construction-related activities will be temporary and is not anticipated to degrade or result in a long-term impact on the existing roadways. The new poles are similar in height to the existing ones and will not be a hazard to airspace.

Human Health and Safety

There are no human health and safety concerns associated with the Project. Induced currents from electromagnetic fields (EMF) produced by the transmission line are limited to Florida Department of Environmental Protection requirements for electric and magnetic field magnitudes on the right-of-way and at the edge of the right-of-way.

E. PUBLIC AND AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

Letters requesting comments from tribes and agencies were distributed during the preparation of the draft EA. Comments received were incorporated into the draft EA and were used to assist with the development of mitigation measures to ensure no significant adverse impacts to important resources.

A Notice of Availability regarding the EA was published in the Palatka Daily News on May 3rd, 7th, and 8th, 2025; and in the Clay Today on May 8th and May 15, 2025. The EA was also available for public review on RD's website at:

https://www.rd.usda.gov/resources/environmental-studies/assessment/seminole-generating-station-sgs-jea-transmission-line-upgrade. The 14-day comment period ended on May 21, 2025, with no comments received.

F. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on its EA, RUS has concluded that the Project would have no significant impacts to air quality, land use, wetlands, floodplains, biological resources, water resources, aesthetics, noise, transportation, or human health and safety. The Project will have no effects on historic properties listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and is not likely to adversely affect federally listed species or designated critical habitat.

In accordance with NEPA and RD's Environmental Policies and Procedures (7 C.F.R. Part 1970), RUS has determined that the environmental impacts of the 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 Project. Any final action by RUS related to the 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 associated with the 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 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: 2025.05.23 17:12:57 -04'00'

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CHRISTOPHER A. MCLEAN
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