FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

East Central Georgia Reliability Project
Morgan, Oconee, Putnam & Walton Counties, Georgia

Rural Utilities Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Georgia Transmission Corporation

Prepared by:
Environmental and Historic Preservation Division
Rural Utilities Service

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A. INTRODUCTION

Georgia Transmission Corporation (GTC) plans to submit a financing request to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Utilities Service (RUS) to construct the several transmission lines and substation facilities associated with the proposed East Central Georgia Reliability (ECGR) Project (Proposed Action) that crosses Morgan, Oconee, Putnam and Walton counties. 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 (NEPA) review (42 United States Code [USC] 4321 – 4347) and USDA Rural Development's Environmental Policies and Procedures (7 CFR 1970). After completing an independent analysis of an environmental report prepared by EKPC 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. 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 regulation, "Protection of Historic Properties" (36 CFR Part 800).

B. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The overall purpose of the Proposed Action is for GTC to construct two new substation facilities and four new transmission lines, and modifications to four existing GTC facilities and four connected actions that are modifications to existing Georgia Integrated Transmission System (ITS) facilities.

GTC will construct, operate and own two new substations and four new transmission line facilities:

- East Walton 500/230 kilovolt (kV) Substation - The proposed substation is on the north side of State Route 186 in Walton County. The site on 62-acre tract owned by GTC and is 0.75 miles east of the city of Good Hope and 3.5 miles west of the city of North High Shoals. The area of disturbance including a driveway, detention pond, egress/ingress on the property for terminating transmission lines, and construction laydown areas is 57.25-acres.

- Bostwick 230 kV Switching Station - A switching station facility is a type of substation facility but operates at a single voltage level and does not contain transformers to step down to lower voltages. This proposed switching station is on the north side of High Shoals Road in Morgan County. This site is 1-mile north of the city of Bostwick and 3-miles south of the city of North High Shoals. It is located along the proposed route of the East Walton – Rockville 500 kV Transmission Line and adjacent to the existing East Social Circle – East Watkinsville 230 kV Transmission Line. The planned graveled, fenced area of the proposed switching station is 350-feet by 500-feet. The area of disturbance, including driveways, a detention pond, and egress/ingress on the property for terminating transmission lines, is 27.54-acres.

- East Walton – Rockville 500 kV Transmission Line - the proposed East Walton – Rockville 500 kV Transmission Line route is 46.5-miles long. It traverses through Putnam, Morgan, and Walton Counties. The proposed Transmission Line requires steel lattice structures and requires a right-of-way (ROW) width of 150-feet. All ROWs were purchased by GTC in 2011. The structures will be constructed of lattice steel in a delta configuration. Structures will vary in height from approximately 100-150-feet above ground. The average distance between structures will be approximately 1,200-feet. There will be 203 lattice steel structures along the 46.5-mile transmission line. The approximate amount of ROW acquired from Georgia Power Company in 2011 was 264-acres. An additional 8-acres of ROW was acquired to connect the vacant ROW to the proposed location of the Rockville 500 kV Switching Station. In addition to the new 500 kV transmission line ROW, additional construction activities will be needed for the development of this 500 kV transmission line corridor.

Approximately 22.94-miles of existing access paths will be utilized for construction and future maintenance activities. These paths will require trees to be side trimmed and some improvements including adding gravel and minor blading and grading. Four miles of newly constructed access paths are needed for construction and future maintenance activities. Temporary construction areas are required for equipment to pull conductor along the 500 kV transmission line project. These temporary construction areas have a sum of 11.19-acres. A 21.75-acre laydown yard has been identified to stage equipment and store equipment during construction along U.S Highway 278.

- Bostwick – East Walton 230 kV Transmission Line - The proposed Bostwick - East Walton 230 kV Transmission Line route is 5.2-miles long and traverses through Morgan and Walton Counties. The proposed transmission line will be constructed as concrete or steel mono-pole structures, which requires a ROW width of 100-feet. Since this route parallels the proposed East Walton – Rockville 500 kV Transmission Line route, the two parallel corridors share 25-feet. The mono-pole structures vary in height from approximately 80-100-feet above ground. There will be 48 mono-pole structures along the 5.2-mile transmission line. GTC will have fiber optics in the shield wire known as OPGW along the length of the transmission line.

- East Walton – Jack's Creek 230 kV Transmission Line - The proposed East Walton – Jacks Creek 230 kV Transmission Line route is 7.65-miles long and located within Walton County. The proposed transmission line will be constructed as concrete or steel mono-pole structures. The route is located mostly along existing roadsides with a variable ROW width of approximately 30-feet; cross country ROWs are 100-foot in width. The acreage of transmission line ROW required is 41-acres. There will be 64 mono-pole structures along the 7.65-mile transmission line.

- Bethabara – East Walton 230 kV Transmission Line - The proposed Bethabara – East Walton 230 kV Transmission Line route is 10.21-miles long and located in Oconee and Walton Counties. The proposed transmission line will be constructed as concrete or steel mono-pole structures. The route takes a combination of roadside and cross-country paths. The route along existing roadsides has a variable ROW width of approximately 30-feet; cross country ROWs are 100-foot in width. The acreage of transmission line ROW required is 73-acres. Most ROWs were purchased in 2013.

<u>GTC will modify four existing transmission facilities:</u>

- Bethabara 230/115/25 kV Substation Modification
- East Social Circle – East Watkinsville 230 kV Transmission Line Loop
- East Social Circle 230 kV and East Watkinsville 230 kV Substation Modifications
- Doyle 230 kV and LG&E 230 kV Substation Modifications

<u>Connected Actions that ITS members will construct, operate, and maintain:</u>

- GTC to construct the Jacks Creek 230 kV Switching Station on behalf of the Municipal Electric Authority of Georgia (MEAG)
- Georgia Power Company (GPC) to construct the Rockville 500 kV Switching Station
- GTC to modify the existing Doyle – Monroe 230 kV Transmission Line on behalf of MEAG to terminate into the proposed Jacks Creek 230 kV Switching Station.
- GPC to modify the existing Scherer – Warthen 500 kV Transmission Line to terminate into the proposed Rockville 500 kV Switching Station.

The overall project will convert 621.37 acres of forested areas to utility use.

C. PURPOSE/NEED

In the early 2000's, GTC began studies to modify the electric grid due to significant projected load growth in Northeast Georgia over the subsequent decade. In addition to the load growth, a marked increase in new electric generation development was also projected for the region. GTC's studies revealed that transporting electricity produced by the increased generation to the large load areas in North Georgia would result in an overload to the existing transmission infrastructure. The East Walton 500/230 kV Plan (the prior name for the ECGR Project) was GTC's solution for the forecasted overloading issue in the area. During the land acquisition process, the need for the proposed transmission projects dissipated. This was primarily due to the economic downturn in 2008, and the failure of new electric generation facilities to develop as anticipated. GTC placed the project 'on hold' but continued to complete the land acquisition process through 2013. GTC acquired the property for the East Walton Substation and the Bostwick Switching Station. GTC completed land acquisition for the ROWs needed on the 46.5-Mile East Walton – Rockville 500 kV Transmission Line project and the 7.65-Mile East Walton – Jacks Creek 230 kV Transmission Line project. The majority of right-of-way was acquired for the 10.2-Mile Bethabara – East Walton 230 kV Transmission Line project except for several gaps along the transmission line alignment when all land acquisition work ceased in 2013.

GTC and other members of the ITS determined the construction of the ECGR Project was necessary due to changes in generation and evolving interregional power flow patterns. Changes in generation include displacement and modified dispatch of traditional fossil-fueled generation, and an increase of inverter-based generation resources (primarily renewable generation in the form of solar facilities). Due to these changes that have placed constraints on the area transmission facilities with a projected overloading of transmission lines under contingency situations as early as 2026, GTC realized the need had a renewed urgency.

The USDA's purpose and need is to either approve or deny GTC's application for financing. The USDA's RUS administers programs that provide infrastructure improvements to rural communities. Specifically, the RUS Electric Program provides loans and loan guarantees to finance the construction or improvement of electric distribution, transmission, and generation facilities in rural areas (USDA 2018b). Financial assistance can include direct loans, guaranteed loans, and grants in order to accomplish program objectives. The Project and borrower meet the eligibility requirements to receive the loan through RUS, as established by the Rural Electrification Act of 1936 and pursuant to 7 CFR Chapter XVIII.

D. ALTERNATIVES EVALUATED

1. No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, RUS would not provide financial assistance to GTC to construct the Project. GTC and other ITS members would not undertake the ECGR Project as proposed. Not pursuing mitigation for the thermal overloads on the system would lead to significant service limitations under single contingency events. This would also lead to potential loss of load in the area resulting in blackouts.

2. Preferred Alternative

The Preferred Alternative is the ECGR Project. Unlike the No Action Alternative, the ECGR Project mitigates the thermal overload under a single contingency of existing lines in the area. The ECGR Project creates an additional transmission source to support added operational flexibility and maintain system integrity and resiliency. It adds more capacity and minimizes the number of construction-related outages to the existing system. In addition, the ECGR Project will improve the voltage profile in the area. Improvement of the voltage profile adds system strength with greater

reliability and resiliency. Therefore, the ECGR Project is the preferred alternative.

3. Other Alternatives Considered

Other Alternatives considered, including Route and Site Alternatives are documented in the Alternatives section of the EA.

E. SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS and MITIGATION

The analysis in the EA documented that the proposed Project would have no adverse effects to land use, farmland, floodplains, wetlands, water resources, coastal resources, biological resources, cultural resources and historic properties, aesthetics, air quality, socioeconomics, noise, transportation, human health and safety, and corridors. In accordance with the requirements of § 1970.104(b), a summary of anticipated impacts on the human environment is provided below, including any mitigation measures deemed necessary to avoid, minimize, or mitigate impacts. GTC is responsible for implementing these measures.

General Land Use

The total land use conversion for all components of the ECGR Project is projected to be 621.37-acres. The predominant land use in the project area is forests followed by pasture with various types of transportation corridors including Interstate 20, U.S. Highway 278, U.S. Highway 441, U.S. Highway 78 and various state routes and county roads. Through Putnam County, the project utilizes a vacant 150-foot ROW previously maintained by Georgia Power Company. The project area includes rural residential development throughout with some industrial development near the Jacks Creek Switching Station portion of the project on the east side of the city of Monroe. The East Walton – Jacks Creek and Bethabara – East Walton 230 kV corridors parallel state routes and county roads where practicable. The total land use conversion for all components of the ECGR Project is projected to be 621.37-acres.

Prime Farmland

The NRCS has determined that the utilization of prime farmland soils for transmission line ROWs does not necessarily result in their conversion to non-agricultural use and does not require a AD-1006 form. Land in transmission line ROWs can remain in cultivation. Therefore, impacts to prime farmland will be minimal, and construction of the proposed transmission line projects will not have a significant effect on farmland in Morgan, Oconee, Putnam and Walton Counties. Total conversion of farmland soils for the substation sites is 72.2-acres. This calculates as 0.05 percent of important farmland soil conversion of the project which is a de minimis alternation. These components of the ECGR Project will not have a significant effect on farmland in Morgan, Oconee, Putnam and Walton Counties.

Floodplains

There are 47.51-acres of proposed transmission line ROW located within FEMA 100-year floodplains. Based on land use calculations with FEMA floodplains, 39.62-acres will be converted from forested land to transmission line ROW. Compared to the 621.37-acres of anticipated land use conversion for the entire project, 6.4% of land use conversion is within designated floodplains. A few transmission line structures will be sited within designated FEMA floodplains, however, no significant grade changes are expected in these areas.

Wetlands/ Streams

Ninety-nine (99) waters are classified as perennial streams, 51 as intermittent streams, 28 as

ephemeral streams, and 11 as open water (man-made ponds) are located within the Project area. GTC has developed construction plans, which designate where vehicular wetland crossings will be needed for construction and future maintenance. GTC has identified numerous off-ROW access paths to minimize impacts to waters and wetlands along the proposed transmission line routes. These access crossings will utilize the USACE's Nationwide Permit 57 for Electric Utility Line and Telecommunications Activities. GTC construction plans identified separate and complete crossings of waters of the United States that have less than a 0.5-acre of impact thresholds under the Section 404 Nationwide Permit Program, therefore avoiding a Section 404 Individual Permit. Compensatory mitigation is not required since each single and complete crossing of waters of the United States falls below the USACE Nationwide Permit mitigation threshold of 0.10-acre for wetlands and 0.01-acre for streams. If unforeseen design changes occur that make compensatory mitigation a requirement, GTC will purchase mitigation bank credits in a USACE-approved mitigation bank within the appropriate watershed or provide USACE-approved in lieu fee mitigation, if necessary.

Biological Resources

GTC contracted with Ecological Solutions to develop a BA which outlined the amount of proposed forested clearing anticipated for the ECGR Project, as well as the proposed timelines for when that clearing would occur. RUS submitted the BA and requested an Emergency Conference of Opinion with the USFWS for the Tricolored Bat and Monarch Butterfly. GTC has agreed to adhere to the restricted summer tree clearing season (May 1 – July 15) and the restricted tree clearing season for winter (December 15 to February 15) except for early successional vegetation growth within the vacant ROW in Putnam County; with some possible clearing being required should unforeseen circumstances occur. GTC has also committed to surveying culverts for tricolored bats if 1) the culvert needs replacing, and 2) the culvert meets suitable winter hibernacula guidelines provided by USFWS, which include culvert size and composition. The determination of the BA and concurrence by RUS is that the ECGR Project is "not likely to jeopardize" the Tricolored Bat and Monarch Butterfly.

Archaeological Resources

Two sites recommended eligible for inclusion on the NRHP and a historic cemetery are located within the ECGR Project ROWs. GTC will remove vegetation around these sites with hand clearing techniques that will involve no ground disturbance. Geotextile fabric may be incorporated, as necessary. Orange barrier protective fencing will be placed surrounding the sites to prevent inadvertent damage during the ECGR Project construction activities.

Cultural Resources

The Project will have physical and visual adverse effects to the Turnwold Plantation and the Apalachee Historic District resources, GTC will procure and submit to HPD (Georgia SHPO) an historic resources survey of the ECGR Project. The survey will encompass properties in Oconee, Morgan, Walton, and Putnam Counties, Georgia to include agricultural structures/buildings/resources/property types forty (40) years of age or older. All project work shall conform to the Secretary of the Interior (SOI) Standards for Archaeology and Historic Preservation, which include the Standards for Evaluation, Identification, and Registration. GTC will ensure that all survey data and digital photographs are entered in the GNAHRGIS online database.

The six (6) historic properties that are recommended as adverse effects in NV5's report are mitigated programmatically through the terms outlined in the previously discussed PA. The PA requires GTC to engage in programmatic mitigation measures. One of those measures is funding the FindIt Program, a state-wide cultural resource survey program sponsored by GTC in partnership with the Department of Community Affairs - Historic Preservation Division, (DCA-HPD). FindIt is administered at

the University of Georgia with the goal of teaching students how to locate historic structures and perform fieldwork including architectural identification, mapping, and data analysis.

Tribal Consultation

Five Native American tribes were invited to participate in the Section 106 process. No responses to the letters of initiation were received. Notifications of Emergency Undertaking pursuant to 36 CFR § 800.12(b) were sent on May 20, 2025, and no objections to the Project were received.

The draft Environmental Assessment incorrectly stated that the second notification to the tribes was sent in February 2025, when in fact, the second notification was sent on May 20, 2025 as noted above.

Air Quality

Any potential air quality effects will be construction-related and therefore short-term. The usual fugitive dust and vehicular emissions from construction related activities will be localized and temporary.

Transportation

The proposed ECGR Project crosses and parallels a series of county roads and highways through Morgan, Oconee, Putnam and Walton Counties. These roads will be utilized during the construction of the proposed projects. Clearing and construction activities and the traffic they generate will be small in scale and temporary on these roads.

Human Health and Safety

The proposal for the ECGR Project introduces new high-voltage, transmission level sources of electromagnetic fields (EMF). However, the EMF frequency diminishes greatly with distance from the transmission line conductors (wires) and substation equipment to nominal levels past the proposed transmission line ROWs and the substation / switching station fences. The proposal for the ECGR Project introduces new high-voltage, transmission level sources of electromagnetic fields (EMF). However, the EMF frequency diminishes greatly with distance from the transmission line conductors (wires) and substation equipment to nominal levels past the proposed transmission line ROWs and the substation / switching station fences.

F. PUBLIC AND AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

RUS initially held three public scoping meetings in the project area in April of 2006. The meetings allowed interested parties to review and comment on the macro-corridors for the transmission lines. GTC held two in-person public information meetings per the four counties where the ECGR Project is located and they were:

- Oconee County Meeting – October 12, 2023: 2pm to 4pm and 6 pm to 8pm
- Putman County Meeting – October 19, 2023; 2pm to 4pm and 6pm to 8pm
- Morgan County Meeting – October 24, 2023; 2pm to 4 pm and 6 pm to 8 pm
- Walton County Meeting – November 30, 2023; 2pm to 4pm and 6pm to 8pm

In accordance with 7 CFR § 1970.102, GTC published public notices in The Walton Tribune on May 7 and May 15, 2025; The Oconee Enterprise on May 8 and May 15, 2025; The Morgan County Citizen on May 8 and May 15, 2025; and The Eatonton Messenger on May 8 and May 15, 2025, announcing the availability of the EA for public review. A copy of the EA was available for public review

at Rural Development's website: https://www.rd.usda.gov/resources/environmental-studies/assessment/east-central-georgia-reliability-projects. RUS and GTC did not receive any comments on the EA during the public comment period.

G. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on its EA, RUS has concluded that the proposed Project will have no significant effects to land use and important farmland, floodplains, wetlands, water resources, coastal resources, biological resources, cultural resources and historic properties, aesthetics, air quality, socioeconomics, miscellaneous issues (noise, transportation), human health and safety, and corridors. The proposed Project will have no significant 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, 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.

H. 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.

I. APPROVAL

This Finding of No Significant Impact is effective upon signature.

Dated:

CHRISTOPHER MCLEAN

Digitally signed by CHRISTOPHER MCLEAN
Date: 2025.06.12 12:51:37 -04'00'

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