

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

**Tupelo Solar Project
Putnam and Flagler Counties,
Florida**

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

Florida Renewable Partners

**Prepared by:
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January 2024

A. INTRODUCTION

Florida Renewable Partners Tupelo Solar, LLC (FRP) plans to submit a financing request to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Utilities Service (RUS) to construct the FRP Tupelo Solar Project (Project) and connect to Seminole Electric Cooperative, Inc.'s (SECI) electrical grid. The Project will be constructed on land owned by FRP, and the 74.5 megawatts (MW) of electricity generated onsite will be delivered to the grid via interconnection to Florida Power & Light Company's (FPL's) Korona-Putnam 230-kilovolt (kV) transmission line. The Project is located within approximately 562 acres of agricultural and silvicultural land along Yelvington and East End Roads in unincorporated Putnam and Flagler Counties, 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 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 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 562-acre Project (412-acres fenced) will be developed for distributed solar power generation and comprises solar photovoltaic (PV) panel arrays with inverters, at-grade access pathways, an offsite collector yard, overhead distribution line, perimeter security fencing, and other ancillary equipment. The electricity generated onsite will be delivered to Florida Power & Light Company's (FPL's) existing Korona-Putnam 230 kV transmission line via a new, 0.68-mile overhead gen-tie line located on the east side of Yelvington Road.

The purpose of the Project is to construct a distributed generation facility that will produce and supply SECI and its nine Member electric cooperatives with enough energy to power approximately 15,000 residential homes and businesses, in accordance with a 25-year Power Purchase Agreement (PPA) with SECI and a Large Generator Interconnection Agreement (LGIA) with FPL, which are both fully executed. The Project provides SECI the ability to secure competitively priced and reliable electric power over the next 25 years.

C. ALTERNATIVES EVALUATED

1. No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, RUS would not provide financial assistance to FRP, the Project would not be constructed, and the land would remain in agricultural use. SECI and its nine Member distribution electric

cooperatives would not receive the required distributed power in accordance with the PPA. The anticipated generation from the renewable energy source would not be available, and SECI would need to seek alternative electric generation sources to replace existing power supply contracts. Reliable, low cost, renewable electric service would not be provided to customers in this service territory, therefore failing to meet the increasing demand for electricity with renewable energy generation. The No Action alternative does not achieve the Project's purpose and need.

2. Action Alternative (Preferred Alternative)

Under the Action Alternative, RUS would consider financing the Project, and FRP would construct and operate a 74.5 MW solar energy center for SECI and its nine Member distribution electric cooperatives. The 562-acre Project area (412-acres fenced) is a combination of two primary components: a photovoltaic solar array, and a 0.68-mile offsite gen-tie line. The solar array comprises individual tracking modules mounted on a metal racking system with minimal disturbance to the groundcover. Modules are supported by driven piles directly embedded in the ground. Following racking installation, native herbaceous vegetation will be established beneath the panels. The solar array also comprises aggregated inverters to meet the total Project output. The onsite collector yard will combine all alternating current (AC) power from the collection circuits and transform the electrical power to the appropriate voltage. Electrical power from the onsite solar array and collector yard will be delivered to the grid via a new overhead electrical interconnection located on the east side of Yelvington Road. No improvements to the new interconnection easement will occur other than the addition of new power poles, which will be installed from the existing Yelvington Road right-of-way (ROW).

The entire solar array will be enclosed within a six-foot chain link fence topped with one foot of barbed wire. The collector yard will be enclosed within a seven-foot chain link fence topped with one-foot of barbed wire. Pathways, typically 12-feet wide and comprising compacted aggregate base material, will be constructed as needed to provide access between the solar arrays. Pathways will be constructed at-grade to maintain pre-development drainage flow patterns. Lighting, designed to minimize spillover into neighboring properties, will be installed at the site entry gate and collector yard. Operable lighting at each conversion station may be installed but will only be used during maintenance activities.

Construction activities will include site preparation, system installation, inspections, and system acceptance. Prior to construction, controls will be installed to avoid discharge sediment and erosional material discharge outside work areas and to ensure debris does not leave the Project site. A Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP) incorporating erosion control best management practices (BMPs) will be prepared prior to the start of construction. The Project is expected to result in a net improvement to stormwater quantity and quality by eliminating agricultural related activities and establishing large grass swales and vegetated buffer areas around proposed impervious areas.

Once the Project is constructed, it will be operated on an unstaffed basis and monitored remotely with minimal, scheduled personnel visits for security, maintenance, services, and system monitoring. A Spill Prevention, Control, and Countermeasure (SPCC) Plan will be in place to ensure implementation of appropriate spill response measures. Maintenance kits, spill kits, and certain critical spares will be stored onsite, while all other components will be readily available from a remote warehouse facility.

3. Alternatives Eliminated from Further Consideration

Alternative locations and technologies must satisfy siting logistics, engineering, and cost constraints while minimizing social and environmental impacts. Technologies such as wind and geothermal power were not considered because they would not generate enough capacity to meet the required SECI demand.

Other properties were considered for the Project, but they were either not available for purchase, did not meet size criteria, or had more environmental constraints which would ultimately result in additional impacts.

D. SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

The analyses in the EA documented the Project would have no adverse effects to existing land use, important farmland, formally classified lands, floodplains, wetlands, water resources, coastal resources, biological resources, cultural/historic resources, air quality, social impact and environmental justice, 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.

General Land Use

Land use within the Project area will change from agriculture and commercial to solar power generation. FRP received an Ordinance Agreement from Putnam County on January 26, 2021, and a Special Use Permit from Flagler County on September 30, 2021, for development of the Project.

Important Farmland

Based on USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service data, approximately 425 acres of the Project is identified as farmland of unique importance. Federal projects or federally funded projects may convert farmland, as defined by the Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA) to non-agricultural uses by completing the Land Evaluation and Site Assessment (LESA) process. Pursuant with the LESA process, FRP Tupelo Solar, on behalf of USDA RUS, submitted USDA *Form AD-1006 Farmland Conversion Impact Rating* to the NRCS on June 18, 2021, for review in accordance with the FPPA. The review was completed by NRCS on June 22, 2021.

Development of the Proposed Action will remove approximately 562 acres of land from use in agriculture and silviculture activities. However, when the Project is decommissioned, all equipment can be removed, and the land returned to agriculture production. Approximately 425 acres of "farmland of unique importance" will be temporarily taken out of production; however, no areas classified as "prime farmland" by the NRCS will be taken out of production by Project development.

Formally Classified Lands

There are no formally classified lands within or adjacent to the Project; therefore, no impacts to formally classified lands will occur.

Floodplains

Most of the Project is mapped by the Federal Emergency Management Agency as being within an area of minimal flood hazard, with only a small, 4.6-acre area along the northern boundary within the 100-year floodplain. However, no grading, fill, excavation, or other improvements will occur within the 100-year floodplain area. Therefore, no impacts to floodplains are anticipated.

Wetlands

No federally jurisdictional wetlands occur within the Project area. Approximately 35 acres of state-jurisdictional wetlands were delineated in August 2020 and March 2021. Wetlands include six isolated forested communities and one isolated wetland shrub community, all of which are in the eastern portion of the Project. The Project was designed to avoid all direct and secondary impacts to wetlands; therefore, the Proposed Action will have no adverse impacts to wetlands.

Water Resources

No federally jurisdictional waters occur within the Project area. Approximately six acres of state-jurisdictional surface waters (man-made agricultural ditches) were delineated in August 2020 and March 2021. The ditches are primarily within the western portion of the Project and used for agricultural irrigation and drainage. Less than 0.5 acres of impacts to man-made surface waters (ditches) will occur to accommodate the solar array. The applicant has fully mitigated for impacts to the ditches via the purchase of credits from the Barberville Conservation Area Mitigation Bank as approved by the FDEP Environmental Resource Permit No. 54-0407214-001-EI.

Potential minor temporary impacts to offsite water quality during the construction phase of the Project will be minimized by implementation of standard construction BMPs that control and treat stormwater runoff, reduce nonpoint source pollution, and prevent soil compaction, erosion, and sedimentation. Thus, the Proposed Action will have no significant adverse impacts to water quality.

FRP will implement a SWPPP to minimize potential for offsite pollutant discharge as required by Florida's National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Stormwater Program Construction Generic Permit. The Project will entail minor groundwater withdrawals from onsite wells during construction for dust suppression and/or soil conditioning. Overall, there will be a significant decrease from the current agricultural groundwater use associated with row crop irrigation. Additionally, FRP will have a SPCC Plan in place to ensure readiness for any potential fuel spills during construction and operation. Therefore, no adverse impacts to groundwater are anticipated.

Biological Resources - General Fish, Wildlife and Vegetation

The Project is located within previously disturbed land used for agriculture and pine plantation; therefore, impacts to biological resources are minor. While short-term displacement to foraging wildlife may occur during construction, the Project will not have significant long-term impacts to non-listed, common wildlife species, and suitable habitat will remain following construction. Additionally, reduced herbicide use may result in beneficial biological impacts over time. Revegetation with native seed mix will be implemented, and a control plan developed to manage invasive vegetation until desirable species are dominant.

Biological Resources - Listed Threatened and Endangered Species

Federally listed wildlife that may occur within the Project area include the threatened Eastern indigo snake and wood stork. Federally listed vegetation potentially occurring within the Project area include the Etonia rosemary. A request for consultation was submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on April 17, 2023. On June 16, 2023, the Service responded with no objection to Project development provided The USFWS Standard Protection

Measures for the Eastern Indigo Snake (USFWS 2013) are implemented. The USFWS *Standard Protection Measures for the Eastern Indigo Snake* will be employed and enforced during construction to minimize impacts to this species. Although some suitable foraging habitat is present in the agricultural ditches, the Project is not located within a USFWS wood stork core foraging area; therefore, impacts to this species are not anticipated. The only known occurrences of Etonia rosemary in Florida are near Florahome, approximately 24 miles west of the Project boundary in Putnam County (FNAI 2021). Potentially suitable habitat exists for this species within the northern portion of the proposed interconnection line, although it has been severely degraded by timber operations. However, Etonia rosemary was not observed during either the 2018 or 2020 field surveys. For these reasons, and due to the highly restricted range, impacts to the Etonia rosemary are not anticipated.

Four state-listed threatened species occur or may occur within the Project area: Southeastern American kestrel (SEAK), gopher tortoise, and the Florida pine snake, tri-colored heron, and little blue heron. The federally listed wildlife and vegetative species are also listed by the state. SEAK have not been observed within the Project but areas of suitable habitat such as cavities within utility poles or tall dead hardwoods may occur within the site. Formal surveys for this species were conducted during the 2021 breeding season and no SEAK nesting was documented within or adjacent to the Project. If active nest cavities are encountered during pre-clearing surveys, FRP will coordinate with FWC to implement a 150-meter buffer, and/or obtain an Incidental Take Permit as needed. No adverse impacts to the SEAK are anticipated. There will be temporary impacts to the gopher tortoise. Prior to construction, FRP will conduct a 100 percent burrow survey to support the submittal of a FWC gopher tortoise Conservation Relocation Permit application. Captured tortoises will be safely relocated to an approved FWC recipient site. If the Florida pine snake is observed during construction, FRP will relocate the species in accordance with FWC's Policy on the Relocation of Priority Commensals (FWC 2020). Although wetlands within the site could be used for foraging, the tri-colored heron and little blue heron were not observed during field reviews, suitable nesting habitat is not present, and no wetland impacts will occur. Additionally, a pre-construction species survey will be conducted. Therefore, no impacts to wading birds are anticipated.

Biological Resources - Bald and Golden Eagles/Migratory Birds

There are no bald eagles nesting within the Project or within two miles of the Project, per onsite field surveys and FWC data. According to the USFWS IPac report generated for the Project, Birds of Conservation Concern with the potential to occur within the site include the American kestrel, great blue heron, and swallow-tailed kite. These species have not been observed within the Project site during any field survey. Other migratory avian species are likely to avoid the Project area during construction, and no adverse impacts are anticipated.

Biological Resources - Invasive Species

The Project primarily comprises row crops which limits the density of existing invasive plant species. While ground disturbance during initial site clearing may create a temporary increase in noxious weeds or invasive vegetation, FRP will revegetate graded areas as soon as feasible with a native ground cover seed mix appropriate for the geographic location, soil type, and season. If chemical control of noxious weeds is required, licensed applicators will be retained.

Cultural Resources and Historic Properties

A Phase I Cultural Resources Assessment Survey of the Project site was completed in August 2020 and March 2021. The survey was submitted to the Florida State Historic Preservation Office, The Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana, Miccosukee Tribe of Indians, Muscogee (Creek) Nation, Thlopthlocco Tribal Town, Seminole Tribe of Florida (STOF), and the Seminole Tribe of Oklahoma. The Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources (DHR) concurred with the survey findings. The only Tribe to respond was the STOF; on May 19, 2021, they stated the Tribe had no objections or other comments about the Project. If any inadvertent discoveries are found during construction, earthwork will cease, and the DHR and five federally recognized tribes will be contacted.

Aesthetics

There are no visually sensitive areas within or near the Project; therefore, no such resources will be affected. Construction will cause minor short-term and long-term impacts to aesthetics. The Project will be visible from East End Road and residences along Tupelo Drive, but minimal lighting and a perimeter vegetative landscape buffer will be installed, which reduces potential visual impacts to surrounding residences. Because the arrays are low-profile, view of the surrounding landscape will not be obstructed. Additionally, glare from solar arrays will be negligible because the dark PV cells will allow sunlight to pass through with little reflection. Based on these factors, the Project will introduce some changes to character of the existing landscape; however, adverse visual impacts to sensitive receptors will be minimal.

Air Quality

The Project area is in attainment and will not result in adverse impacts to air quality or exceed air quality standards. Emissions during the construction phase are expected to be temporary and minor. Implementation of BMPs, including soil stabilization and water trucks, will minimize fugitive dust generation. The solar array does not generate any emissions during operation; increasing reliance on renewable sources such as solar rather than fossil fuels to generate power may result in a foreseeable decrease in emissions of regulated pollutants over time.

Socio-Economic Impacts Assessment/Environmental Justice

The Project will have no adverse effects on minority or low-income populations within Putnam or Flagler Counties. The Project is expected to have a positive regional and local effect, specifically through increased employment opportunities, economic benefits, and tax revenue. Temporary jobs will be created for contractors, foremen, electricians, and laborers during site construction. The Project will generate sales and use tax revenues through in-state expenditures, generating a positive impact on local businesses and economy during construction and operation. The Project will also create consistent electricity costs for SECI and its cooperatives over the life of the PPA.

Noise

Noise impacts may increase slightly during the construction phase but will be temporary, limited to daytime hours, and not expected to adversely affect sensitive offsite receptors. Construction will involve increased vehicular and truck traffic, heavy equipment, and portable installation equipment such as mechanical pile drivers. Once operational, the Project is not anticipated to increase ambient noise. The primary source of noise associated with operation of the Project will be from light vehicular traffic accessing the site during regular security and inspection activities.

Traffic and Transportation

The Project is expected to result in a temporary, short-term increase in traffic volumes during daytime hours on Yelvington Road due to the presence of workers, material and equipment deliveries, and the access/egress of heavy machinery or trucks. Street closures are not anticipated, and areas adjacent to the Project will remain open to property owners.

Human Health and Safety

A Phase I Environmental Site Assessment was performed for the portion of the Project west of Yelvington Road in November 2018, in accordance with the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM Standard Practice E1527-13 and the EPA All Appropriate Inquiry Rule for evaluation of commercial real estate. East of Yelvington Road, the Project site consists of vacant land used for silviculture, which is unlikely to contain any hazardous materials. The assessment identified no Recognized Environmental Conditions (RECs) or Controlled RECs (CREC) in connection with the site, by activities conducted on the site or by adjacent properties/activities. During construction, contractors will comply with all federal and state government and OSHA regulations. Workers will wear personal protective equipment, and standard OSHA recommended BMPs for safety will be implemented. Compliance with regulations and standard manufacturers' protocols for storage, transportation, and use of any hazardous construction-related materials will be followed. Security fencing will remain in place throughout construction and operation of the Project. The public will not be allowed to enter the facility.

Climate Change/Greenhouse Gases

Solar panels and associated equipment will have an operating life of several decades; energy production that substitutes fossil fuels to meet the demand for electricity in Putnam County, Flagler County and surrounding communities is expected to reduce greenhouse gases and have a positive net benefit on climate change over time.

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. The availability of the EA for public review was announced on November 4 and 9, 2023 in the Palatka Daily News, published in Putnam County, Florida, with circulation Putnam County. The availability of the EA for public review was also announced on November 9 and 16, 2023 in the Palm Coast Observer, published in Flagler County, Florida, with circulation Flagler County. A 14-day comment period was announced in the local newspaper notices which ended on November 17 and November 22, 2023, respectively. The EA was also available for public review at <https://www.rd.usda.gov/resources/environmental-studies/assessments>. No comments regarding the Project were received by the Applicant. Two comments were received by RUS via email on November 6, 2023, and November 12, 2023. The November 6, 2023, comment questions whether adequate consideration was given to listed species, their habitat, and wetlands. These subjects were analyzed and are addressed in EA Sections 3.3, 3.4, and 3.6. This comment also includes a statement regarding property tax valuation. This subject was analyzed and addressed in EA Section 3.10.1.4. The November 12, 2023, comment pertains to prime farmland, the surrounding community, and health risk. Prime/important farmland is addressed in EA Section 3.1.1.2, community in EA Section 3.0 (Social Impact/Environmental Justice in 3.10), and health risk in EA Sections 2.1.9.4, 3.9.1, 3.10.1.2, and 3.12.

F. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on its EA, RUS has concluded the Project will have no significant impacts to existing land use, floodplains, wetlands, water resources, coastal resources, the surrounding community, air quality, noise, transportation, aesthetics, 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 no effects to federally listed species or designated critical habitat. The Project will 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 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 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 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.

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For additional information on this FONSI and EA, please contact Robert Deems, Environmental Protection Specialist at Robert.Deems@usda.gov.