

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

**Fort Sage to Herlong 120 kV Interconnect Project
Lassen County, CA and Washoe County, NV**

**RURAL UTILITIES SERVICE
U.S. Department of Agriculture**

**Plumas Sierra Rural Electric Cooperative
California 16**

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

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A. INTRODUCTION

The Rural Utilities Service (RUS) expects to receive a request for financial assistance from the Plumas Sierra Rural Electric Cooperative (PSREC) to construct the proposed Fort Sage to Herlong 120 kV Interconnect Project, a 13.67-mile transmission line originating at the Fort Sage Substation Washoe County, NV and terminating at the to be expanded Herlong Substation in Lassen County, CA (the proposed Project). RUS may finance the proposed Project, thereby making it an action subject to review under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and all applicable federal environmental laws and regulations. RUS determined that the proposed Project would require an Environmental Assessment (EA), in accordance with RUS's Environmental Policies and Procedures, 7 CFR Part 1794. RUS conducted an independent evaluation of the EA prepared by PSREC, concurred with its scope and content, and adopted it as the agency's EA, in accordance with 7 CFR § 1794.41. RUS has evaluated the proposed Project's purpose and need, reasonable alternatives, and potential impacts to the environment, and has concluded that the proposed Project will not have a significant impact on the human environment.

B. PURPOSE AND NEED

PSREC is a member-owned, not-for-profit electric transmission cooperative that is required to provide reliable and affordable electrical service to its members. Based on power system stability studies, PSREC determined that due to regional load growth and the age-related deterioration of the existing infrastructure, the system was no longer sufficiently reliable, and their members would experience outages with increased frequency. In order to increase the system's power capacity and voltage stability, and satisfy their regulatory responsibility to provide their members with reliable service, PSREC has proposed the construction of a 120 kV transmission line and the construction of a new substation. The proposed Project will connect the system to a higher voltage source and reduce of the length of the electrical power line (and distance) to the major regional loads to meet the current demands in the electrical system and provide for projected growth. RUS has reviewed and approved the engineering studies for the proposed Project and determined that it adequately meets the purposed and need.

C. PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed Project involves the construction of a 13.67-mile single-circuit, 120 kV three-phase transmission line along existing right-of-way (ROW), and the expansion of the existing Herlong distribution substation to accommodate the requisite new equipment. The proposed Project's route crosses through 4.24-miles of Bureau of Land Management Eagle Lake Field Office (BLM) administered land, 3.52-miles of land owned by the California State Lands Commission (CSLC) and 0.51-miles of the Doyle State Wildlife Area (SWA), administered by the

California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG). The remaining 5.04-miles of the line will be located on private or Lassen County lands.

D. ALTERNATIVES EVALUATED

The EA assessed the no action alternative, under which none of the participating federal or state agencies would provide approval of the project, and six (6) different route alignments and construction methods for the 120 kV transmission line, including the proposed Project, a northern alignment, a southern alignment, collocation with the existing Garnier Road 69 kV line, paralleling the existing Garnier Road 69 kV line, and undergrounding. RUS determined that the no action alternative would not meet the purpose and need of the proposal, and PSREC would fail to fulfill its obligations to ensure reliable electricity to its consumer members. The alternative alignments (northern and southern) were eliminated from further assessment due to their greater length, cost, permitting constraints, and anticipated environmental impacts associated with crossing a greater distance of Doyle SWA. The Garnier Road options (collation and paralleling) were eliminated due to greater cost, permitting constraints, and potential strong public opposition to the expansion of the existing ROW. Though the undergrounding alternative would reduce impacts to visual resources, it was eliminated due to the greater potential impact on cultural resources, the maintenance and operational issues, and the significant cost.

E. SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

In order to construct the transmission line, approximately 36-acres will be temporarily disturbed and approximately 4-acres will be permanently disturbed to place and access the 117 50-90' wooden structures and to construct the substation. The EA determined that the proposed Project would have no significant impact, either directly, indirectly, or cumulatively, on air quality, environmental justice, prime farmland, floodplains, wetlands, geology, soils, water resources, noise, hazardous materials, fire management, vegetation resources, livestock grazing, recreation, visual resources, land use, and socioeconomics. Biological and cultural resources required field survey and consultation with state and federal agencies to determine the proposed Project's potential effects, the details of which are included below.

Biological Resources

Three (3) botanical surveys were conducted in 2007, 2008, and 2010 to identify the potential for presence of plant species of concern. Potential habitat for federally or state listed threatened or endangered plant species was not identified within the project area. Potential habitat was not identified for any BLM sensitive species in the Nevada portion of the proposed Project; however, eleven (11) special status species, designated by either the BLM or the California Native Plant Society (CNPS), were determined to potentially occur within the California portion of the proposed Project. It was ultimately determined that through the implementation of protective measures included in Appendix B of the EA, the effects of the

construction and operation of the proposed Project would be minor, and not result in any long-term, population-level effects.

Particular attention was paid to the potential impacts on wildlife species, given that the proposed Project's route briefly crosses through the Doyle SWA. An initial baseline wildlife survey was conducted in 2007, and an additional field survey was completed in 2010. Twenty-six (26) special status wildlife species (protected under federal or state regulation) were identified as potentially present within the project area, though potential impacts were identified for only ten (10) avian species that will be avoided through the implementation of protection measures included in Appendix B of the EA. It was determined that the proposed Project would not cause the loss of or significantly modify the habitat of existing species of concern, or would interfere with the movement of native resident or migratory wildlife.

Cultural Resources

In accordance with the MOU executed in May 2008, RUS served as the lead agency for consultation under Section 106 of the NHPA, and engaged the BLM, the Nevada State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), the California SHPO, the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California, the Susanville Indian Rancheria, the Greenville Indian Rancheria, the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe, and the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony (collectively, the Parties) to determine potential effects of the proposed Project (undertaking, for the purposes of Section 106) on historic properties. PSREC prepared two (2) cultural resource surveys, including the *A Cultural Resource Inventory of Approximately 12.3 Miles of Transmission Line for the Plumas-Sierra Fort Sage to Herlong 120kV Interconnection Project in Lassen County, California and Washoe County, Nevada* (May 2009) and *An Addendum to a Cultural Resource Inventory of Approximately 12.3 Miles of Transmission Line for the Plumas-Sierra Fort Sage to Herlong 120kV Interconnection Project in Lassen County, California and Washoe County, Nevada* (October 2010). As a result of the findings of the surveys, PSREC adjusted the route alignment and developed an Access Plan to ensure avoidance of all historic properties. In consultation with the Parties, RUS determined that the proposed Project have no adverse effect to historic properties. RUS, the BLM, the SHPOs, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP), and PSREC (as an invited signatory) executed a Programmatic Agreement (PA) in May and June of 2012 to establish the procedures for implementing the Access Plan and the post-review discovery provisions, and monitoring by both a qualified archeologist and tribal representative, in accordance with 36 CFR § 800.13(a)(1). The tribes have been invited to participate in the PA as concurring parties; however, to date, none of the tribes have executed the PA.

F. AGENCY AND PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

For the proposed Project to be constructed on the selected route, the BLM must grant a ROW easement under Section 501 of the Federal Land Management Policy Act, 43 USC 1761, for the portion that crosses through BLM administered lands. A Memorandum of Understanding was executed on March 11, 2008 that designated RUS as the lead agency and BLM as a cooperating

agency for the proposed Project for compliance with NEPA, Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, and Section 106 of NHPA. Upon acceptance of the EA, BLM issued their Finding of No Significant Impact on August 21, 2011, and executed the PA on May 15, 2012.

The proposed Project is also subject to the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) because the proposed Project will require the approval of a ROW leases by the CLSC to cross state lands and the CDFG to cross the Doyle SWA. In accordance with 40 CFR § 1506.2, the EA was prepared as a joint document with the CLSC.

The availability of the EA for public review was announced in the *Portola Reporter* and the *Feather River Bulletin* on July 13, 2011. The EA was made publicly available electronically on the RUS Website, <http://www.rurdev.usda.gov/UWP-EA.html>, and in hard copy at the RUS, BLM, and CLSC Offices. The thirty-day public comment period concluded on August 10, 2011, during which time no public or agency comments were received.

G. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on its EA, RUS has concluded that the proposed Project would have no significant impacts to the human environment. RUS has concluded that the proposed Project is not likely to affect federally listed threatened and endangered species or designated critical habitat. The proposed Project will have no adverse effect on historic properties listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Properties. RUS will continue to consult on a government-to-government basis with the tribes and with the SHPOs in accordance with the terms of the PA.

In accordance with National Environmental Policy Act, as amended (42 U.S.C. § 4321 et seq.), the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations (40 CFR §§ 1500-1508), and RUS's Environmental Policies and Procedures, as amended (7 CFR Part 1794), RUS has determined that the environmental impacts of the proposed Project have been adequately addressed and that no significant impacts to the quality of the human environment would result from construction and operation of the proposed Project. Any final action by RUS related to the proposed Project will be subject to, and contingent upon, compliance with all relevant federal and state environmental laws and regulations. Because RUS's action will not result in significant impacts to the quality of the human environment, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared for the proposed Project.

H. RUS LOAN REVIEW AND RIGHT OF ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW

This FONSI is not a decision on PSREC's expected loan application and therefore not an approval of the expenditure of federal funds. Issuance of the FONSI and its notices concludes RUS' environmental review process in accordance with NEPA and RUS' Environmental Policies

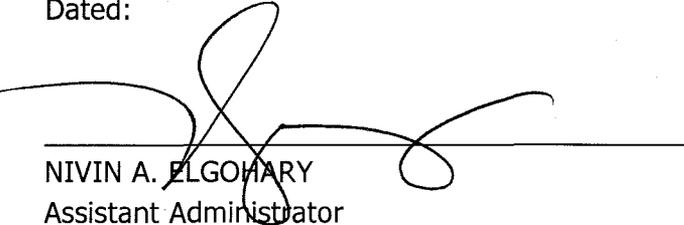
and Procedures. Final loan approval is dependent on the conclusion of the environmental review process in addition to financial and engineering review of the proposed Project. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Issuance of the FONSI and publication of notices will allow for these reviews to proceed. There are no provisions to appeal this decision; 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 on signature.

Dated:



NIVIN A. ELGOHARY
Assistant Administrator
Electric Programs
Rural Utilities Service

Contact Information

For additional information on this FONSI and EA, please contact Ms. Emily Orler, Environmental Protection Specialist, at USDA, Rural Utilities Service, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW., Stop 1571, Washington DC 20250-1571, (202) 720-1414, or emily.orler@wdc.usda.gov.