

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Rebuild Lines 71, 72, & 73 Project

George County, Mississippi

RURAL UTILITIES SERVICE
United States Department of Agriculture

Cooperative Energy

Prepared by:
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A. INTRODUCTION

Cooperative Energy plans to submit a financing request to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development's Rural Utilities Service (RUS) for the proposed Rebuild 69 kilovolt (kV) Transmission Lines 71, 72, & 73 Project (project) in George County, Mississippi. 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 RUS's NEPA implementing regulations, Environmental Policies and Procedures (7 CFR Part 1970).

After completing an independent analysis of an environmental report prepared by Cooperative Energy and its consultants, 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 proposed project. RUS finds that the EA is consistent with federal regulations and meets the standards for an adequate assessment. Cooperative Energy published newspaper notices, 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. PURPOSE AND NEED

The overall purpose of this project is to provide energy to the existing electrical grid in George County, Mississippi. Existing overhead electric transmission lines 71, 72, & 73 will be reconstructed. Project objectives include providing safe, affordable, and reliable power to Cooperative Energy's electric distribution member, Singing River Electric. The project will also improve electric system stability and provide voltage support during contingencies. The project will reconstruct three transmission lines that were originally constructed in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The existing transmission line poles and components have reached the end of their useful life. The project will ensure reliable electric power service in the future for the George County area by replacing the old electric system components and wood poles with new modern components and steel or concrete poles.

RUS has reviewed the applicant's purpose and need for the project and determined that the proposal will meet the present and future needs of Cooperative Energy.

C. ALTERNATIVES EVALUATED

No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, RUS would not provide financial assistance to Cooperative Energy, and/or the proposed project would not be constructed. This alternative would not assist Cooperative Energy in providing energy sourced from the project area to meet increasing demand for electricity and reduce the need for electrical grid maintenance.

Action Alternative (Preferred Action)

Under the Action Alternative, RUS would consider financing the proposed project and Cooperative Energy would reconstruct and operate three overhead 69 kV transmission lines on private land in George

County, approximately 6 miles east of Lucedale, Mississippi. Transmission Line 71, roughly 12.1 miles long, will connect the Benndale 69 kV Substation to the Basin 69 kV GOAB Switching Station; Transmission Line 72, 9.15 miles in length, will connect the Basin GOAB Switching Station to the Agricola 69 kV Switching Station; and Transmission Line 73, 8.2 miles long, will connect the Rocky Creek 69 kV Switching Station to Agricola 69 kV Switching Station. The rebuilding of the transmission lines will include aerial Optical Ground Wire, providing fiber communication link to improve the reliability of communications network. The three reconstruction projects will occur in the existing 100 foot Right of Ways (ROW). Tree clearing will not be required; however, some routine vegetation management may be needed. The facility would have a maximum footprint of 359 acres on private land owned by several landowners. The project will replace the old electric system components and wood poles with new modern components and steel or concrete poles.

Within the project site, existing roads and the existing cleared ROW will serve as lay down yards to support project construction and operation; no permanent roads would be constructed. The number and length of the roads would be minimized to the extent possible to reduce surface disturbance. Cooperative Energy anticipates that the existing roads would cover approximately 25 acres total.

Alternatives Eliminated from Further Consideration

In addition to the No Action Alternative and Action Alternative, Cooperative Energy considered other siting alternatives which are documented in Section 2.2 of the EA.

D. SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

The analyses in the EA documented that the proposed project would have no adverse effects to land use, floodplains, wetlands, water resources, coastal resources, biological resources, cultural/historic resources, aesthetics, air quality, social impact and environmental justice, noise, transportation, human health and safety, corridors, and soils. A summary of anticipated impacts on the human environment is provided below, including mitigation measures deemed necessary to avoid or minimize impacts, as summarized in Table 1. Cooperative Energy is responsible for implementing those measures.

Floodplains. The FEMA Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRM) of George County, Panel Numbers 28039C0175E, 28039C0225E, 28039C0200E and 28039C0100E, with effective dates of September 19, 2012, shows the project area is in a 100-year flood hazard area. Consultation and coordination with George County confirmed that the project site does lie within a floodplain, however, no poles will be placed within the floodplain. Best management practices will be utilized and sediment and erosion controls will be implemented to avoid and minimize runoff. Therefore, the proposed action would result in no direct or indirect impacts to any identified floodplains.

Wetlands. The project is located within the Pascagoula River Watershed, Mississippi's second largest basin. During the project's scoping period, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) did not respond within 45-days of receipt of the completed pre-construction notification and therefore, the project was verified by default under the jurisdiction of the Nationwide Permit 12. The State of Mississippi adopted Nationwide Permit 57 on December 11, 2020. Nationwide Permit 57, Electric Utility Line and Telecommunications Activities, supersedes Nationwide Permit 12. Nationwide Permit 57 allows for the construction of electric utility lines within jurisdictional waters of the U.S. No fill material will be placed in the wetlands in the project area. Contours of the land and wetlands if altered during construction, will be returned to their original contours

and natural condition. Wood mats would be used if equipment and/or construction materials are required to ingress / egress through wetlands and removed upon construction completion. Other mitigation measures include maintaining a 50-foot buffer surrounding wetlands and Waters of the U.S. (WOUS). Line 71 will traverse the Pascagoula River, a river that is listed on the National Rivers Inventory (NRI) but is not included in the National Wild and Scenic River System. The proposed action would not impact any wetlands because the wetlands or other potentially jurisdictional WOUS would maintain their natural contours and condition.

Water resources. Under the proposed action, no water would be required during construction. Cooperative Energy intends to maintain and preserve natural drainage patterns in the project area. Erosion, stormwater, and pollution control measures would be implemented prior to ground disturbing activities in accordance with best management practices outlined in the EA. The proposed action would not impact the existing water drainage within the Pascagoula River Watershed. Cooperative Energy selects to control erosion associated with surface stormwater discharges during construction, decrease the volume and rate of stormwater runoff, and increase pollution attenuation after construction.

Threatened and Endangered Species. A natural resources field survey was conducted in June 2020 to assess the proposed transmission line reconstruction for the presence of suitable habitats for federally listed threatened and endangered species. One designated critical habitat was identified for George County. An informal U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) project area review conducted in August 2021 listed the Wood Stork, Black Pine Snake, Eastern Indigo Snake, Gopher Tortoise, Yellow-blotched Map Turtle, Dusky Gopher Frog, Gulf Sturgeon, Pearl Darter, and Louisiana Quillwort as threatened or endangered. Surveys for these listed species and their habitats took place in June 2020. The field survey did identify suitable habitat for the gopher tortoise and active gopher tortoise burrows. No other species listed as threatened or endangered or their suitable habitats were discovered during the field survey.

Since the proposed action could have direct or indirect effects on the gopher tortoise, Section 7 consultation with the USFWS was initiated. The USFWS provided comments to Cooperative Energy in August 2020 requesting that they adopt the USFWS's standard gopher tortoise conservation measures. The measures include practices that avoid impacts to the gopher tortoise and its burrows, training construction and survey crews for awareness, flagging burrows and installing silt screen fence at a minimum of 25-feet from all burrows. With the implementation of the conservation measures, the USFWS determined the proposed project may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect the gopher tortoise. The USFWS also determined that the proposed project may affect, but is unlikely to adversely affect the Louisiana quillwort. The USFWS did state that no further consultation is required with their office (Jackson Mississippi Field Office) unless there are changes in scope or location of the proposed project. No bald eagle or golden eagles or other migratory bird species or their nests were observed in the project area during the field surveys.

Cultural and historic properties. The Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) was notified of the project on April 27, 2020. MDAH determined that due to the topography of the proposed project area and the presence of archaeological sites near the proposed project area, a cultural resources survey was necessary. Cooperative Energy hired TerraXplorations Inc. to perform the Phase I Cultural Resources Survey. MDAH responded to the survey on July 13, 2021 that due to the proximity of a resource, they recommended that Cooperative Electric implement avoidance methods to include using wooden matting for heavy equipment and to avoid construction during wet conditions. Additionally, the project should not adversely impact two (2) sites that were identified in the report where the boundaries could not be established. SHPO concluded

that with the implementation of the avoidance measures, the project would have no adverse impacts to cultural or archaeological resources.

Cooperative Electric initiated tribal consultation with the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, the Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana, and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians of the project on April 27, 2020 and August 18, 2021. The Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana responded with an email dated September 16, 2021, that the project will have no negative impacts on any archaeological, historic, or cultural resources of the Coushatta people. The remainder of the tribes did not respond as of the publication of the EA.

Table 1. Summary of Mitigation for the Proposed Action

Resource	Mitigation Measure
Water resources	Cooperative Energy will implement proper erosion control measures using Best Management Practices (BMPs) including removing soil tracked onto public roadways; installing silt fencing to divert water around disturbed soils and construction materials; provide buffers surrounding wetlands and other WOTUS; periodic site visits to ensure that vegetation establishment is satisfactory; and remove the temporary BMPs after sufficient vegetative cover has been achieved. Specifically, the mitigative measures would detail the structural and non-structural BMPs Cooperative Energy selects to control erosion associated with surface stormwater discharges during construction, decrease the volume and rate of stormwater runoff, and increase pollution attenuation after construction.
Biological resources	To avoid impacts to the gopher tortoise, Cooperative Energy will implement gopher tortoise burrow avoidance measures contained within their Gopher Tortoise Management Plan. These measures include creating 25-foot buffer zones that no equipment or personnel can enter around each gopher tortoise burrow. Construction crews will be educated on the presence of gopher tortoise and their burrow and the contents and requirements of the Gopher Tortoise Management Plan. Cooperative Energy would develop a weed management plan for the project and would implement measures to manage noxious weeds.
Cultural and historic resources	Cooperative Energy would consult with the MDAH and other pertinent parties to develop an undertaking-specific inadvertent discovery plan. The plan would outline the process for addressing discoveries that may be exposed during ground-disturbing activities. Due to the interest in the project and area by the consulting parties, continued involvement and input from the consulting parties would be needed in development of a discovery plan.

Resource	Mitigation Measure
Aesthetics	<p>To reduce the degree of visual impact of the project, Cooperative Energy will implement mitigation measures where visual disturbance associated with construction, O&M, and decommissioning is inevitable. This includes limiting soil and vegetation disturbance, applying appropriate color treatments and minimizing the use of lighting at night. Workers can reduce the primary visual impacts from construction (i.e., dust caused by grading, on-site traffic, and hundreds of workers present at the site during construction) by using dust- abatement measures, such as vehicle speed restriction and watering of active areas and roadways. Soils within and around the analysis area are sensitive to erosion; therefore, Cooperative Energy will limit the amount of water used to manage the dust to avoid altering the form of the landscape.</p> <p>To reduce visual impacts from the proposed project, Cooperative Energy will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • minimize the extent of soil and vegetation disturbance to the extent practicable; • minimize lighting usage during construction and operations and maintenance; • restore the site to its original contours while minimizing disturbance to soils; and • re-seed and plant vegetation in disturbed areas in accordance with noxious weed management plan provided as part of project permitting process. <p>After approximately 50 years, when the operation of the proposed project could cease, Cooperative Energy will restore the analysis area to a landscape that once again blends into the surrounding area's forms and textures. Because of the climate of the project location, planting and reseeding may need to occur over several seasons to ensure the success of native species. The decommissioning of the site would create new visual impacts, including the removal of all aboveground structures, fencing, and debris.</p>
Air quality	<p>Measures to minimize or eliminate impacts to air resources are described in the proposed action's project design features. Mainly, Cooperative Energy has committed to control fugitive dust, if it becomes necessary at the project site by applying water or soil binders at regular intervals to the project site, limiting vehicular speed, and avoiding soil- disturbing activities during periods of high winds. No additional mitigation measures are recommended.</p>
Transportation	<p>Cooperative Energy and George County could enter into an agreement for the maintenance and/or restoration of local roadways from the increased heavy truck usage during the construction period.</p>
Soils	<p>Cooperative Energy would use BMP erosion control techniques to mitigate soil impacts. In those areas requiring topsoil salvage before construction, workers would segregate the topsoil from subsoils and would stockpile those soils separately. Cooperative Energy could use some of the topsoil after construction to resurface areas disturbed by construction and would disk compacted soils before final stabilization. It is not anticipated that any subsoil removed would be spread in upland cropland or pastures. Cooperative Energy will implement, monitor, and maintain the BMPs described in the EA to minimize erosion and sedimentation. The company would comply with the construction site stormwater discharge permit, if applicable and adhere to the noxious weed plan.</p>

E. PUBLIC AND AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

Local newspaper notices, announcing the availability of the EA and participation under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act were published on February 24, 2022 and March 3, 2022 in the weekly George County Times newspaper. A copy of the EA was available at the Lucedale – George County Public Library at 507 Oak Street, Lucedale, Mississippi 39452 and on the RUS project website, <https://www.rd.usda.gov/resources/environmental-studies/assessments>.

The 14-day public review period began on February 24, 2022 and concluded on March 10, 2022. The RUS website included project information in an easily accessible format (e.g., Section 508–compliant portable document format file [PDF]). RUS received no comments from the public.

F. FINDING OF NO NEW SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on its EA, RUS has concluded that the proposed project would have no significant effects to the human environment as disclosed in the EA. 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. The proposed project would not disproportionately affect minority or low-income populations.

In accordance with the NEPA, as amended (42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq.), the CEQ Regulations (40 CFR 1500–1508), and Rural Development’s Environmental Policies and Procedures (7 CFR Part 1970), 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 new 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 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 New Significant Impact is in effect upon signature.

Dated:

CHRISTOPHER A. McLEAN

Assistant Administrator
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Contact information

For additional information on this FONSI and EA, please contact Suzanne Kopich, Environmental Protection Specialist, Water and Environmental Programs, USDA, Rural Utilities Service, at (202) 961-8514, or email: suzanne.kopich@usda.gov