



File Code: 1950
Date: January 2, 2020

To: Interested Forest Service Parties
Project: APS McGuireville-Village of Oak Creek 69kV Transmission Line
Open for Comment: Jan. 6–Feb. 5, 2020

The Coconino National Forest is considering a proposal from Arizona Public Service Company (APS) to construct a 69-kilovolt (kV) above-ground electric power line to improve electrical reliability within and surrounding the communities of McGuireville and the Village of Oak Creek. The APS McGuireville-Village of Oak Creek 69kV Transmission Line project would cross Forest Service land; therefore, APS is coordinating with the Coconino National Forest. Depending on the power line's routing, the project would include 11 to 14 miles of above-ground line and administrative-use roads to maintain the line.

Background

A year ago, APS initiated a process to develop and evaluate preliminary powerline route options, assessing potential environmental impacts. Baseline information about land use, visual, biological, cultural, and recreational resources was collected within the study area. APS held a public open house meeting in the Village of Oak Creek on June 5, 2019, to announce the project to the public and to gather feedback from residents and stakeholders. The project information and preliminary route options were presented to the public for an opportunity to comment and ask questions. APS has taken the baseline environmental information and preliminary public input into consideration to develop a preferred powerline as well as two additional routes, which are described in this scoping letter.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to increase the electrical reliability in the area by connecting the McGuireville Substation (located near Cornville Road and Restoration Loop) and the Oak Creek Substation (near State Route 179 and Jacks Canyon Road) with a new 69kV powerline. This will minimize APS outages to customers in the Oak Creek, McGuireville, and Cornville areas on either of the existing lines. The Oak Creek and McGuireville substations are at the end of long radial segments without a backup source. Connecting the substations would provide backup power for each line.

As part of the planning process, there would be a need for a project-specific amendment to the *Land and Resource Management Plan for the Coconino National Forest* (Forest Plan). Construction and operation of an above-ground powerline would require a forest plan amendment, at the same time as the decision document for this project, because the proposed activities would not meet the desired scenic integrity objectives (SIOs) for the project area established in the Forest Plan.

Proposed Action

The APS McGuireville-Village of Oak Creek 69kV Transmission Line project proposes to construct and operate up to 14 miles of an above-ground 69kV power line, depending on routing, to connect the APS Oak Creek and McGuireville substations. Identified routes include a preferred powerline route, which follows existing travelways along Cornville Road and Beaverhead Flat Road, as well as two additional routes set off the main travelways. In all identified routes, the proposed powerline would follow a single path as it travels to each substation. The single path near the Village of Oak Creek would be alongside the



Kel Fox Trail and cross SR 179 (tying into existing above-ground lines that cross SR 179) on its way to the Oak Creek substation (see map enclosure).

The new segments of the 69kV power line are proposed to be built on steel poles with a single 69kV circuit configuration (three wires per circuit). Some portions of the line may consolidate with existing single-circuit poles creating a double 69kV circuit configuration (six total wires on the same pole). It is anticipated that any new poles would be approximately 65 feet in height, similar to existing 69kV lines in the area. The powerline segments would require a right-of-way or easement 40 feet in width to construct, operate, and maintain the facility.

APS would require maintenance roads for the entire length of the project. Existing road infrastructure would be utilized, where appropriate. If lines would need to be established off existing roads, the amount of new road to be built could be up to 14 miles. In instances where public access would be restricted, APS would develop "administrative-use only" roads. A potential example would occur along the 2.5-mile Kel Fox Trail that is currently a non-motorized trail; this would remain a non-motorized trail even if administrative motorized use is allowed for construction and maintenance purposes.

To identify and assess the environmental impacts associated with the project, an environmental assessment (EA) will be developed under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). NEPA establishes the format and content requirements of an environmental analysis and documentation as well as requirements for public involvement and disclosure. The responsible official's decision will be based on compliance with law, regulation, and policy; consultation with cooperating and regulatory agencies and interested tribes; review of public input received throughout the planning process; review of the environmental consequences disclosed in this EA; and the outcome of any administrative review process.¹

This project is being reviewed for consistency with the March 2018 forest plan, released to guide resource management. The national forest is required to review the proposed action and any alternatives for potential impacts to resources.

The proposed power line and associated roads would not comply with the following forest plan guidance after all reasonable stipulations to minimize impacts are applied: "Management activities and permitted uses should be designed and implemented to maintain or move toward the desired SIOs."² As a result, a forest plan amendment would be required.

A forest plan amendment would be completed pursuant to the 2012 Planning Rule at 36 CFR 219.13. Forest plan amendments require that the forest review and determine whether an amendment would prevent the ability of the plan to provide for substantive requirements (such as providing for sustainability, timber, biological diversity, and multiple use) identified in the 2012 planning rule. Based on an initial assessment, a number of the substantive requirements in sections 219.8 through 219.11 of the 2012 Planning Rule (36 CFR Part 219) have been identified as potentially relevant to this amendment. I have determined that the following specific substantive rule requirements contained in rule sections 219.8 through 219.11 (219.8–Sustainability, 219.9–Diversity of plant and animal communities, 219.10–Multiple Use, and 219.11–Timber Requirements based on NFMA) apply to this amendment as follows: the

¹ This decision is subject to the project-level pre-decisional administrative review process set forth at 36 CFR 218, subparts A and B. Additionally, the plan amendments are subject to the pre-decisional administrative review process set forth at 36 CFR 219, subpart B.

² Scenic Resources standards and guidelines are listed in the *Land and Resource Management Plan for the Coconino National Forest* on p. 121.



construction and operation of the proposed power line is relevant to the social, cultural, and economic conditions managed under the forest plan according to 219.8(b)(1), sustainable recreation as identified at 219.8(b)(2), requirement that there is appropriate placement and sustainable management of infrastructure as identified at 219.10(a)(3), and aesthetic values, recreation settings and opportunities, scenery, and soil values as identified at 219.10 (a)(1). It is my determination that the site-specific plan amendment would not result in changes of a nature that would prevent the 2018 Forest Plan from meeting the aforementioned substantive requirements identified in the planning regulations.

APS's proposed action would be a "land special use,"³ as defined by the forest plan: "Land special uses include authorizations associated with utility lines, road use, communication sites, research, water resources, wind energy development and related access. Utility and energy transmission corridors, along with communication sites, are generally long-term commitments of National Forest System lands. Increased demand is expected for utility lines; renewable energy sources; community infrastructure; private land access; and local, state, and federal public transportation systems to serve the growing populations of Arizona and the Southwest."

Guidelines for special uses, as outlined in the forest plan, that apply to this APS project include:

- New and reconstructed overhead utility lines, support towers, and other utility infrastructure should be located and designed to minimize adverse ecological, wildlife, and scenic impacts.
- Structures, such as communication sites and utilities, should be designed to reduce contrast with the desired landscape character in accordance with scenic integrity objectives.
- To optimize use of existing utility sites and corridors and to limit impacts to undisturbed areas, sites and corridors for existing utilities and areas adjacent to road rights-of-way should be used or expanded before creating new sites or corridors.
- Utility lines should be buried to maintain scenic values. Where environmental, cultural, economic, or technical concerns prevent the burial of utility lines, site-specific design features should be developed to protect scenic values.

Resource Reviews

In development of the preliminary route options, baseline information was collected about land use, visual, biological, cultural, and recreational resources within the study area. The siting of the preliminary route options was designed to avoid and/or minimize impacts to these resources, where feasible. As part of the NEPA process, analysis will be conducted on these environmental resources, as well as others that are identified during the process.

Archaeological Resources – Sensitive archaeological resources are located within the project study area. Preliminary route options were designed to avoid and/or minimize impacts to these known resources. Archaeological surveys will be completed to identify, assess, and minimize impacts to archaeological resources.

Biological Resources – Sensitive biological resources, including riparian areas, highly-erodible soils, and sensitive plant species, are present within the project area. Preliminary route options were designed to

³ Land special use general descriptions as well as standards and guidelines are listed in the *Land and Resource Management Plan for the Coconino National Forest* on pp. 104-107.



avoid and/or minimize impacts to these known biologically sensitive areas. Biological surveys will be completed for the project to identify, assess, and minimize impacts to biological resources.

Recreation – Potential project impacts to recreation have been identified through public input. A portion of the proposed transmission alignment is in proximity of the Kel Fox Trail. Multiple comments provided by members of the public during the June public involvement indicated concerns the project could impact recreational activities along this trail. Commenters suggested that placement of a powerline on the east side of the trail, or underground, would minimize recreational impacts.

Visual Resources – This project is not expected to meet the scenic integrity objectives in the 2018 Forest Plan, so a site-specific forest plan amendment would be required. Several visually sensitive resources have been identified in the area including part of State Route 179 designated as a national scenic byway called the Red Rock All-American Road.⁴ As well, scenic overlooks, trails, and residences within the study area are considered highly sensitive to visual change. Based on the special use guidelines identified previously, the forest may require that transmission lines be partially or fully buried in order to meet SIOs. A map of the forest's SIOs can be found online at the project's website: <https://tinyurl.com/APS-McGuireville-OakCreek>.

Implementation Timeline

Implementation of the proposed project would occur upon completion of the decision and will take approximately 12 months to construct. The project is needed to be in-service by summer 2024.

Opportunity to Comment

The public is asked to provide substantive comments regarding the proposed action. Substantive comments are those comments that are within the scope of the project, are specific to the proposed activities in the project area and have a direct relationship to the project. When citing references, commenters should state specifically how those references relate to the proposed action. Include hard copies or functioning internet links to any references.

Opportunities for public participation and notification on the plan amendment and substantive requirements are combined with the public participation and notification processes used for project planning at 36 CFR 218. Comments should be provided prior to the close of the comment period by Feb. 5, 2020.

Submit comments in writing, through one of the following methods: via e-mail to comments-southwestern-coconino-redrock@usda.gov (include "APS McGuireville-Oak Creek" in the subject line); via mail to Red Rock Ranger District, Attention: APS McGuireville-Oak Creek, P.O. Box 20429, Sedona, AZ 86341; via facsimile to (928) 203-7539; or in person at the Red Rock Ranger District Office, 8375 State Route 179, Sedona, AZ 86351.

Comments received in response to this solicitation, including names and addresses of those who comment, will be considered part of the public record on this proposed action and will be available for public inspection. Personally identifiable information should not be included in the body of the comment.

⁴ Scenic Roads descriptions are listed in the *Land and Resource Management Plan for the Coconino National Forest* on pp. 186-187.

Contact Person

Project information can be viewed online at <https://tinyurl.com/APS-McGuireville-OakCreek>. For general questions, contact Red Rock Ranger District NEPA Planner Elizabeth Munding at elizabeth.a.munding@usda.gov or (928) 203-2914.

Sincerely,



For LAURA JO WEST
Forest Supervisor

Enclosure

USDA Non-Discrimination Policy Statement: DR 4300.003 *USDA Equal Opportunity Public Notification Policy (June 2, 2015): In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident. Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English. To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at http://www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint_filing_cust.html and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: program.intake@usda.gov.*

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