

SCOPING/ INFORMATION PACKAGE

RIDGELINE ENERGY LLC ANEMOMETER TOWER(S) EA

OWYHEE FIELD OFFICE (OFO)

This information package summarizes a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposal to grant a right-of-way (ROW) for anemometer tower(s) to Ridgeline Energy LLC. The grant would be issued in compliance with the Owyhee Resource Management Plan (RMP) dated December 30, 1999. Federal actions must be analyzed in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant Federal and State laws and regulations to determine potential environmental consequences.

The purpose of this report is to inform the interested public(s), local government, cooperating agencies and tribes of the proposal. BLM is soliciting comments to assist with the NEPA review. Analysis of the proposal is ongoing, and will be documented in an Environmental Analysis (EA) with an estimated completion date of the late spring of 2010. Comments received in response to this solicitation will be used to identify potential environmental issues related to the proposed action and to identify alternatives to the proposed action that meet the purpose of and need for the project.

Purpose and Need of Action

Ridgeline Energy LLC (Ridgeline) applied to the Owyhee Field Office (OFO) for a Wind Energy Site Testing and Monitoring Right-of-Way (ROW) Grant. Ridgeline received a grant for wind testing rights within a ROW area of approximately 22,500 acres. Pursuant to that grant, Ridgeline needs to install atmospheric test equipment in met towers to analyze the wind resources in the area. Wind data from additional met towers would supplement wind testing being conducted at three met towers that have already been permitted and installed. Collection of the meteorological data would allow Ridgeline to assess whether the site is suitable for wind turbine power generation.

The purpose for this action is to provide opportunities for met tower installation (vehicle access and met tower locations), consistent with the terms of the Ridgeline ROW grant that would minimize impacts to sensitive resources including sage grouse, other special status plant and animal species, and visual resources.

Existing Conditions

The proposed met tower locations are distributed across topographic locations in portions of Townships 2 North to 1 South, Ranges 5 West to 6 West, Owyhee County, Idaho. These areas are known as the French John Hill (FJH), Pole Creek Top (PCT), and Sands Basin (SB) areas.

The project area is located approximately 10 miles southwest of Marsing, Idaho (site map enclosed).

Met towers and associated access roads would be located on hilltops and ridges in the sagebrush steppe and grasslands. Although habitat features such as canyons, caves, rivers and riparian areas exist within the cumulative effects area, the met tower locations lack these features. Land use in the area is predominantly for livestock grazing and recreational use.

Cultural: Rimrock overhangs and shallow caves are potential locations for prehistoric shelters, or as locations for petroglyphs. The presence of lithic fragments further indicates use of the area by Native American people. Later more historic use of the vicinity includes potential evidence of mining, original settler migration, or more recent can or refuse scatter.

A cultural resources analysis was conducted in compliance with NEPA and with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966 and its implementing regulations (36 CFR Part 800, as amended in 1999). No cultural and archaeological features were detected at any of the locations associated with the proposed met tower sites or the likely access routes from the nearest road or jeep trail.

Vegetation: The met tower sites are located in the Owyhee Uplands and Canyons Level IV Ecoregion of Idaho (McGrath et al. 2002). This ecoregion consists of sagebrush steppe/grasslands, deep river canyons, barren lava fields, rock outcrops and caves. Dominant vegetation includes Wyoming big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata wyomingensis*), bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*), low sagebrush (*Artemisia arbuscula*), Idaho fescue (*Festuca idahoensis*), bluegrass (*Poa* spp.), squirreltail (*Elymus elymoides*), bitterbrush (*Purshia tridentata*), and western juniper (*Juniperus occidentalis*).

Vegetation surveys have been conducted at the met tower sites and access roads, and none of the sites contained vegetation species of concern. However, the site does contain suitable habitat for vegetation species of concern and the EA will evaluate the effects of disturbance to vegetation species of concern.

Wildlife: No federally listed animal species are known to occur within the project analysis area, although a number of species classified BLM "Sensitive Species" or State of Idaho "Species of Special Concern" are known or likely to occur within the analysis area. In addition, nesting territories for golden eagles are known to exist within the cumulative effects area and they forage in the area of the proposed MET towers. Golden Eagles are managed under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (1962) and new regulations in 50 CFR 22 have been established to manage take. Sensitive species from the following groups of animals including reptiles, birds, fish and small mammals are known or thought to exist within the project or cumulative effects area.

Greater Sage-grouse are of particular concern due to their avoidance of tall structures on the landscape. While there are no known leks in the immediate vicinity of the proposed towers, sage-grouse have been documented in the project area and approximately 30 sage-grouse were observed near the proposed tower site of FJH-1B in January, 2010. Winter and nesting habitat

could be impacted as a result of tower construction. The guy wires associated with MET towers also pose a collision hazard to sage-grouse.

The project area contains a diverse population of avian species either as residents or seasonal migrants. The project is located only a few miles west of the Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area (USDI 2008), which contains one of the world's largest concentration of nesting birds of prey, and raptors would be common visitors to the project area.

Other wildlife that is commonly found in the project area includes mule deer, pronghorn antelope, California big horn sheep, mountain lion, coyote, bobcat, and a myriad of small mammals. Crucial deer winter range is just outside the cumulative effects area. There are also various species of hawks and migratory land birds, as well as amphibians and reptiles in the project area.

Recreation: The tower sites encompass or are near four Special Recreation Management Areas (SRMA): Jump Creek Canyon SRMA, Blackstock SRMA, Squaw Creek SRMA and the Owyhee Front SRMA. A wide variety of recreational opportunities exist in the site vicinity, including off-highway vehicle operation (OHV), hunting, fishing, hiking, picnicking, horseback riding, rock hounding, camping, nature study, sightseeing, and horseback riding. Much of the public land in the area is used for general recreation. Met towers FJH-1, FJH-1B, FJH-6, and FJH-7 are located in the semi-primitive, motorized recreation classification. In this classification, small isolated recreation and/or rangeland management facilities are present, and facilities such as powerlines are acceptable. Met tower PCT-3 is located in the roaded natural recreation classification. In this recreational management area, more disturbances, such as recreational facilities and powerlines may be present.

Visual: The RMP divides the field office area into several different Visual Resource Management (VRM) zones. VRM Class 1 specifies very low visual disturbance which should not attract attention. VRM Class II allows for management activities, but should not attract the attention of the casual observer. The VRM Class III classification allows for moderate visual changes to the landscape, while major visual modifications are allowed in the VRM Class IV classification.

Four of the met tower sites are located in a VRM Class III area (towers FJH-1, FJH-6, FJH-7 and PCT-3). One of the towers is located in a VRM Class IV area (tower FJH-1B).

Wild Horses: The sites are located between two Wild Horse Herd Management Areas (HMAs): the Sands Basin and Hardtrigger HMAs. The EA will analyze the effects the met towers would have on wild horse management.

Proposed Action

Ridgeline is conducting field work to evaluate the feasibility of developing a turbine-generated wind energy facility on public land in Owyhee County, Idaho. This proposed action includes construction of five 200-foot tall met towers to be used to assess wind potential in this area. The

five met towers would be constructed in the summer/autumn 2010 and wind measurements would be remotely collected for a period of approximately one to three years.

The met towers would be a monopole construction and sit on a steel plate (base) approximately 12.8 square feet in size. The met tower would be supported by 24 guy wires, attached to the ground surface in a square pattern approximately 130', 145' and 160' from the base of the tower. The met towers would contain anemometers, wind vanes, and a thermometer to measure wind energy. The met towers would be fitted with remote reporting equipment that Ridgeline can access electronically without visiting the site. Occasional site visits may be necessary for inspections, service, or tower maintenance. When the met towers are no longer needed, they would be removed from the site.

No new access roads would be created, nor would existing roads be improved as part of the proposed action, but minimal cross-country travel (nearest road or jeep trail to met tower site) would be required at the time of installation.

No permanent foundation would be necessary to prepare the tower site for installation. Surface soil disturbance to accommodate tower installation would be minimal, consisting only of leveling and clearing vegetation from the area under the steel base plate, plus minor disturbance at the location of guy wire anchors. Installation of each met tower would require a crew of three to four persons. The largest piece of equipment used in construction would be a standard-sized pickup truck. Sectional met towers would be transported in large wooden crates with dimensions of approximately 4' x 4' x 8'. Two pickup trucks with trailers carrying equipment, tools and crew would be expected to be on site for approximately two days for each tower. Ridgeline anticipates a period of six to eight weeks for crews to complete the installation of the five towers. Site accessibility due to weather conditions would affect this time period. The met towers would be constructed in 2010 under an authorization issued for a period of up to three years.

Tower construction would begin by laying out each tower horizontally on the ground at the site. The tubes would be assembled on the ground, and solar panel and communications equipment would be installed. The tower would then be raised using a battery-powered winch on one of the trucks and a gin pole. A second vehicle with a drill attachment would be used to stabilize the towers using guy wires secured by anchors drilled into the ground. The 24 guy wires are attached at six different heights on the tower and anchored with standard screw-in anchors. The anchor points would be placed at the four corners of a square approximately 130', 145', and 160', respectively from the tower (1,135' of guy wire per tower). The disturbance at each anchor point would be minimal, only the area (a few square feet) necessary to install the screw-in anchor. Once the tower is constructed, the gin pole would be removed.

There would be stipulations attached to the authorization for resource protection such as no cross-country travel during wet conditions, using approved methods to prevent raptors from perching on the met towers, etc. These stipulations will be outlined fully in the EA.

Preliminary Issues

Cultural surveys have been conducted at the met tower sites and no cultural resources were encountered. However, minor ground leveling necessary to support the tower base could uncover cultural resources.

The BLM is in the process of consultation with the Shoshone Paiute tribal office to evaluate the met tower sites relative to Native American Religious concerns.

Several sensitive species are known to utilize habitat within the project area. For birds, the guy wires needed to support MET towers are known collision hazards and a cause of mortality. The possibility of collisions is especially a concern for raptors, including golden eagles; and for sage-grouse. The towers can also provide perch opportunities for raptors and increase predation rates on existing populations of prey species. Sage-grouse are known to winter in the project area and there may be nesting habitat as well. These habitats would likely become unsuitable and avoided by sage-grouse once MET towers have been constructed.

The EA will analyze the effects of the met towers relative to visual resource classifications established by the BLM, as well as impacts on recreation in the project area.

Preliminary Alternative Development

Ridgeline has spent approximately two years deciding on the location of the five met towers. The proposed locations are near existing roads and located on topographic high points from where they can best collect representative wind data. Besides the proposed action, the no action alternative is the only alternative that has been identified prior to this public scoping notice.

Decision to be Made

The BLM must analyze through the EA process whether issuing a ROW and completion of the project would result in significant impacts. If no significant impacts are recognized, BLM will issue a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and provide a ROW grant, authorizing Ridgeline to proceed with installation of met towers and collection of wind data.

Public Input Needed

Comments are specifically requested on the proposed action, preliminary issues and alternatives. Comments made on this proposal would be most helpful if they are received within 30 days of the date of this scoping package and are directly relevant to the proposal and project area. The BLM will not reject public feedback outside the established public involvement time frames; however, these comments may be considered secondary to comments received in a timely manner and may only be assessed to determine if they identify concerns that would substantially alter the assumptions, proposal, design or analysis presented in the EA. Comments sent electronically should be sent to kelly_moore@blm.gov with the title of this project in the subject line or via U.S. Mail at the address listed below. Please identify whether you are submitting comments as an individual or as the designated spokesperson on behalf of an organization. Issues that are outside the scope of the proposal will not be addressed in this planning level.

The primary contact for questions and comments for this analysis is:

Kelley Moore,
Owyhee Realty Specialist
Bureau of Land Management
Owyhee Field Office
20 1st Avenue West
Marsing, Idaho 83639
(208) 384-3300

Literature Cited

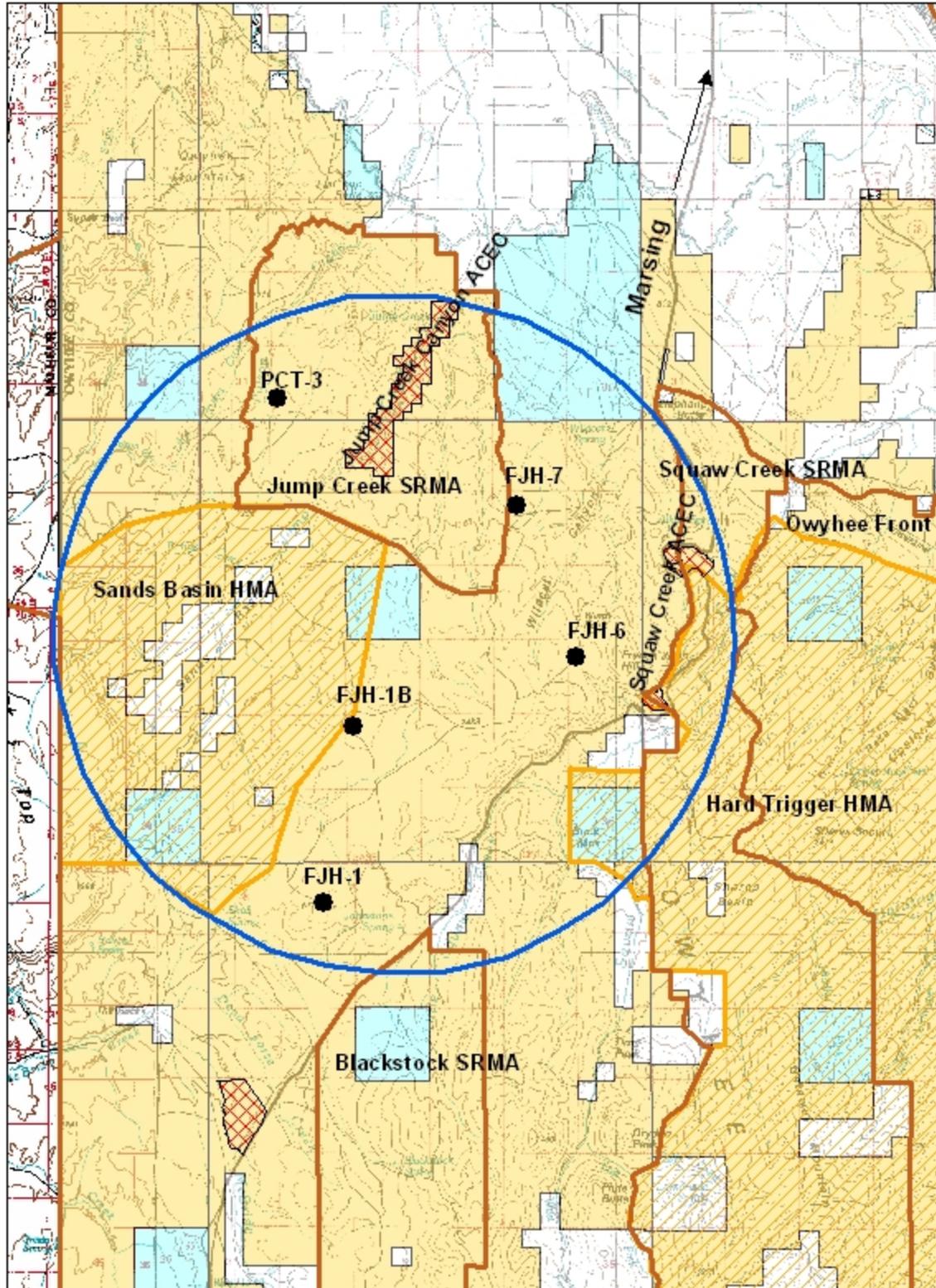
Owyhee Resource Management Plan (RMP) 1999

United States Department of the Interior (USDI). 2008. Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area Resource Management Plan Record of Decision. Boise District, Bureau of Land Management, Boise, Idaho. 222 pages

Attachment: Site Map

I-35758 Ridgeline Energy LLC Scoping Notice

Site Map
Owyhee County, Idaho
January 26, 2010



Cumulative Effects Area	HMA's
SRMA's	BLM
ACEC's	PRIVATE
	STATE

No Warranty is made by the Bureau of Land Management as to the accuracy, reliability, or completeness of these data for individual use or aggregate use with other data. This map cannot be made Section 508 compliant. For help with its data or information, please contact the BLM Idaho State Office Webmaster at 208-373-4000.



1/26/2010. UTM 11, NAD 83, Meters