

Nevada Broadband Telemedicine Initiative Right-of-Way Project

Draft Finding of No Significant Impact

DOI-BLM-NV-C020-2011-0512-EA

December 2011



Background

The *Nevada Broadband Telemedicine Initiative* (Project) would connect, maintain and operate a statewide fiber optic telemedicine network and would serve a minimum of 36 hospitals and medical facilities, with additional capacity available to serve public safety entities, educational institutions, and Tribal governments. This Project is being funded by the Department of Commerce, National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). The NTIA is the federal lead for this Project. The Nevada Hospital Association was awarded a \$19.6 million federal grant to build fiber optic routes to connect communities between Reno and Boulder City, Nevada. Communities along Highways 80 and 50 (Elko and Ely) would also be connected by use of existing conduit.

The Project would construct and maintain new fiber optic cable between Reno and Boulder City, Nevada. The new fiber optic cable on BLM-managed lands would include: approximately 15 miles of new buried cable between Goldfield and Lida Junction; 310 miles of new aerial fiber optic cable connected to existing transmission poles; and five miles of fiber optic cable in existing conduit.

Land Use Plan Conformance

This Proposed Action is in conformance with the Carson City Field Office Consolidated Resource Management Plan (2001). Sections that specifically apply to this Project include:

- LND-7, Administrative Actions #6: “Exchanges and minor non-Bureau initiated realty proposals considered where the analysis indicates they are beneficial to the public.”
- ROW-4, Administrative Actions #3: “...applicants for right-of-way grants...are subject to standard approval procedures outlined in the right-of-way regulations (43 CFR 2800)...”

This Proposed Action is in conformance with the approved Tonopah Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Record of Decision (ROD) (1997). The section that applies to this Project includes:

- Item #6, page 19: “... All other lands within the Tonopah Planning Area in which there are no un-resolvable conflicts with other resource values would be open to consideration for linear or areal rights-of-way, leases and land use permits.”

The Proposed Action is in conformance with the ROD for the approved Las Vegas RMP and Final Environmental Impact Statement (1998). The section that applies to this Project includes:

- RW-1-h, Management Direction: “All public land within the planning area, except as stated in RW-1-c through RW-1-g are available at the discretion of the agency for rights-of-way under the Federal Land Management Policy Act. Although RW-1-e states that ACEC’s are avoidance areas, this project is not inconsistent with the ACEC as the new fiber optic cable would be placed on existing poles owned by Valley Electric. The existing transmission line and ROW through the Armargosa Mesquite ACEC pre-dates the ACEC designation. As this fiber optic cable would be placed on existing poles, there would be no ground disturbing activities.”

Finding

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts in the Environmental Assessment for the *Nevada Broadband Telemedicine Initiative Environmental Assessment* (EA), DOI-BLM-NV-C020-2011-0512-EA, I have preliminarily determined that the Proposed Action would not have a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, the preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS) is not required for compliance with the National Environmental Policy of 1969 (NEPA).

Context:

The Proposed Action and all alternatives span between Boulder City, Nevada in southern Nevada and Reno, Nevada in northern Nevada. This distance crosses many different ecological areas.

In southern Nevada, the climate is characterized by hot dry summers in the Las Vegas Valley which is frequently over 100 degrees F and cool winters. The freeze-free season is over 225 days. Precipitation averages less than five inches per year in the Las Vegas, Boulder City, and Pahrump areas. Near Mountain Springs on Highway 160, the higher elevation equates with higher precipitation of 10 to 15 inches per year. Precipitation falls during summer monsoons and winter storms.

In central, western and northern Nevada, the climate is characterized by hot dry summers and cold winters. The frost-free season is 100 to 70 days. Precipitation comes during the winter months and is typically five to 10 inches per year in the valleys and up to 20 inches per year on Hwy 395 between Reno and the Carson Valley.

The new fiber optic cable on BLM-managed lands would include: approximately 15 miles of new buried cable between Goldfield and Lida Junction; 310 miles of new aerial fiber optic cable connected to existing transmission poles; and five miles of fiber optic cable in existing conduit. All areas are along road and highway corridors; placement of fiber optic cable would occur on existing transmission poles, and existing maintenance roads would be utilized.

Intensity:

1) *Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.*

The installation of new broadband fiber in the western and southern Nevada would benefit hospitals, medical facilities, public safety entities, educational institutions and Tribal governments. Minor temporary impacts would occur along the U.S. Highway 95 corridor during installation of underground and overhead fiber optic lines. The corridors are highly disturbed, and overhead and underground utility lines are common.

2) *The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.*

The Proposed Action would have no effect on public health or safety on BLM-managed lands. Providing broadband served to unserved and underserved areas of western and southern Nevada and would serve a minimum of 36 hospitals and medical facilities, with additional capacity available to serve public safety entities, educational institutions, and Tribal governments.

3) *Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.*

No wetlands, park lands, prime or unique farmlands, wild and scenic rivers, ecological critical areas, would be affected by the Proposed Action. Historic and prehistoric cultural resources on BLM-managed lands have been inventoried and would be protected by avoidance or modification of the treatments as needed. Although a small portion of new overhead fiber optic cable would cross through the Amargosa ACEC, the cable would be attached to an existing transmission lined owned by Valley Electric. Access to the area would be by existing jeep trails and there would be no ground disturbing activities.

4) *The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.*

The portion of the project area on BLM-managed lands is along highway and road corridors; the project area on BLM-managed lands is highly disturbed, and overhead and underground utility lines are common.

5) *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

The construction of overhead and underground utility lines on BLM-managed lands is a well understood activity. Overhead and underground utility lines already exist along the highway and road corridors. There are no uncertain or unknown risks.

6) *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

The Proposed Action would not establish a precedent for future actions on BLM-managed lands. Any future proposals to manage vegetation on BLM-managed lands would require project-specific NEPA analysis.

7) *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.*

The Proposed Action on BLM-managed lands is not related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.

8) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the NRHP or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

NTIA is the lead federal agency for compliance with the NHPA. A Class I inventory of the project area, and Class III inventory for a portion of the new underground section between Lida Junction and Goldfield has been completed. The BLM will not issue its FONSI and Decision Record until all consultation under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act is completed.

9) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the ESA of 1973.*

The NTIA is the federal lead for compliance with the Endangered Species Act. The findings of the Biological Assessment submitted to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) were as follows: “may affect but would not likely adversely affect the desert tortoise; and no effect for the southwestern willow flycatcher, yellow bellied cuckoo, and Yuma clapper rail.” The BLM will not issue its FONSI and Decision Record until the USFWS issues a Biological Opinion for this Project, anticipated in December 2011.

10) *Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*

The Proposed Action is in conformance with the Carson City Field Office Consolidated RMP (2001), the Tonopah RMP and Record of Decision (ROD) (1997), and the Las Vegas RMP and Final Environmental Impact Statement (1998). The Proposed Action would not violate or threaten to violate any federal, State, or local law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment.

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Date