



# United States Department of the Interior



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT  
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## **Unicom Incorporated, TERRA Yukon Broadband Telecommunications Project**

### *Six Microwave Repeater Tower Sites*

Environmental Assessment, DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2014-0004-EA

Case Files FF-096748, FF-096749, FF-096750, FF-096750, FF-096751, FF-096752, FF096753,  
FF-096920, FF-96921,

## **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

### **Background**

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) (DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2014-0004-EA) to analyze the effects of six remote repeater sites operated by Unicom Incorporated, a subsidiary of GCI, on lands managed by the Anchorage Field Office (AFO) and the Central Yukon Field Office (CYFO). One site is north of Kotzebue and five are located east of the Seward Peninsula/Nulato Hills area from Buckland south to Koyukuk. The six repeaters are part of a larger project to bring broadband internet to northwest Alaska and the Norton Sound and Kotzebue Sound communities. The Terra Yukon project would complete a ring network around western Alaska, connecting Kotzebue to Nenana and the Fairbanks-Mat-Su fiber optic lines. Completing this circuit will improve Unicom's ability to maintain and reroute broadband services across the network in the event of outages of existing and planned repeaters. The EA considered a no action alternative and the proposed action (six repeater sites to be authorized on BLM-managed lands).

Under the Proposed Action alternative, five of the repeater towers would be constructed on mountaintops with helicopter-support only. However, the Igichuk Hills Tower is sited near the Noatak River and is less than three three miles away. An overland winter move is proposed at this site to haul tower components to the site and helicopter-supported construction would occur once the components of the site have been staged. Unicom would be granted six, 20 year leases, one for each repeater site, and one construction right-of-way authorization for a three year period to allow construction and another right-of-way authorization to conduct geotechnical studies to ensure rock competency at the tower sites prior to construction.

A programmatic Agreement (PA) is being developed to complete Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) for all six tower sites as well as connected actions on State of Alaska and private lands. A Notice To Proceed (NTP) to develop the proposed BLM towers and all connected actions will not be issued until the PA is signed.

The following assessment of significance pertains only to the six tower sites on BLM-managed lands and does not include connected actions on State of Alaska and private lands where Unicom has existing or planned activities associated with the broadband network.

### **Finding of No Significant Impact**

This action and its effects have been evaluated consistent with the Council on Environmental Quality regulations for determining *significance*. Per 40 CFR § 1508.27, a determination of *significance* requires consideration of both context and intensity. The former refers to the relative context in which the action would occur such as society as a whole, affected region, affected interests, etc. The latter refers to the severity of the impact.

#### *Context*

This means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human, national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. For instance, in the case of a site-specific action, significance would usually depend upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Both short- and long-term effects are relevant. The disclosure of effects in this EA found the actions to be limited in context.

The Proposed Action and alternatives would occur in remote locations in western Alaska. The six repeaters in the proposed action are all several miles from any established community:

- The Nogahabara Repeater is located 23 miles southwest of Galena, a small community of 470 people (64% Alaska Native).
- The Rain Repeater is located 24 miles northwest of Koyukuk, a small community of 96 people (96% Alaska Native).
- The Totson Repeater is located 78 miles Northwest of Galena, a small community of 470 people (64% Alaska Native).
- The Triplet Repeater is located 58 miles southeast of Selawik, a small community of 829 people (85% Alaska Native).
- The Igichuk Hills repeater is located 30 miles north of Kotzebue, the hub of the Northwest Arctic Borough, with a population of 3,224 (74% Alaska Native)
- The Hunt repeater is located 30 miles 30 miles southeast of Selawik a small community of 829 people (85% Alaska Native) (EA, p. 2-2).

All towers listed are located on remote mountaintops. The Totson and Nogahabara repeaters are in close proximity to the Innoko and Koyukok National Wildlife Refuges. Because the tower footprints are limited in size (less than one acre each), the proposed construction activities are

limited in duration, and the effects are local in nature, this project's effects are not likely to significantly affect regional or national resources.

### *Intensity*

I have considered the potential intensity/severity of the impacts anticipated from proposed communication towers, associated tower site facilities and the plan of development relative to each of the ten factors suggested for consideration by the Council on Environmental Quality:

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

The EA considered both potential beneficial and adverse effects (for example, see EA p. 2-1 for potential positive impacts from increased connectivity of the existing broadband service). None of the effects identified in the EA are beyond the range of effects analyzed in the Kobuk-Seward Resource Management Plan (RMP) Record of Decision (2008), or the Central Yukon Resource Management Plan (RMP) Record of Decision (1986).

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

No aspect of the Proposed Action or alternatives would have an effect on public health and safety. Project design features, special permit stipulations, and the approved plan of development will require operating procedures to minimize public health and safety concerns.

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

The Proposed Action has two repeaters (Totson and Nogahabara) located near wildlife refuges. The degree to which the action may adversely affect wildlife and subsistence activity has been analyzed in this EA and no significant impact is anticipated to wildlife populations or significant impacts to subsistence harvest opportunities or subsistence resources. (EA p 4-10, 4-11, 4-17, 4-22, 4-25)

The design features identified in the EA and in the plan of development would minimize effects to visual resources (EA, p.4-43). Project design features and permit stipulations specific to cultural resources specify how the operation will minimize impacts to and/or protect these resources as well as the PA discussed above.

No known cultural resources will be adversely effected by the proposed action. The Programmatic Agreement will have procedures in place to identify and mitigate any potential effects to cultural resources.

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

The effects of the Proposed Action are similar to many other communication operations in remote geographic settings. No unique or appreciable scientific controversy has been identified regarding the effects of the Proposed Action.

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

Similar to Item 4 above, the effects of the Proposed Action are similar to many other communication operations in remote geographic settings. The analysis has not shown that there would be any unique or unknown risks to the human environment.

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.*

Similar actions have been reviewed and approved in Alaska as well as on a national scale. This project neither establishes a precedent nor represents a decision in principle about future actions. The Proposed Action and alternatives are consistent with actions appropriate for the installation of communication sites through Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) leases as outlined in the Kobuk-Seward RMP and Central Yukon RMP.

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

Cumulative effects are addressed for each of the resources. The environmental analysis did not reveal any significant cumulative effects nor 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 National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources.*

There are no features within the communication site lease areas that are listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. A programmatic Agreement (PA) is being developed to complete Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) for all six tower sites as well as connected actions on State of Alaska and private lands. A Notice to Proceed to develop the proposed BLM towers and all connected actions will not be issued until the PA is signed.

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 Endangered Species Act of 1973.*

Several federally threatened or candidate bird species have the potential to occur at the tower sites and/or at staging areas (EA, p 4-20, 4-22.). However, the adverse impacts to these species would be minimized through project design features and stipulations (EA, p.2-16 through 2-20). The towers are self-supporting structures without guide wires; this will minimize the potential for bird strikes. Furthermore, the permanent footprint of the tower structures is less than one

acre per tower; although this would represent a loss of habitat for these species for the life of the project, in the context of the greater project area, which is largely undeveloped, this loss does not pose significant harm to the species or populations (EA, p 4-20, 4-22.).

*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 and/or alternatives do not threaten to violate any law (EA, pp. 1-4). The Proposed Action and alternatives are in compliance with the 43 CFR § 2800 regulations and consistent with the Kobuk Seward and Central Yukon RMPs.

**Conclusion**

Therefore, on the basis of the information contained in the EA (DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2014-0004-EA), and all other information available to me, it is my determination that:

1. None of the environmental effects identified meet the definition of significance as defined by context and intensity considerations at 40 CFR § 1508.27;

The alternatives are in conformance with the Kobuk-Seward Resource Management Plan Record of Decision (2008); and Central Yukon Resource Management Plan (RMP) Record of Decision (1986), and

2. The Proposed Action and alternative does not constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment.

Therefore, neither an Environmental Impact Statement nor a supplement to the existing EA is necessary and neither will be prepared.

/s/ Doug Ballou for Alan Bittner

12/22/2015

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Alan Bittner  
Anchorage Field Manager

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

/s/ Timothy J. La Marr

1/13/2016

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Timothy J. La Marr  
Central Yukon Field Manager

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Date

**Attachments**

1. Unicom Incorporated, TERRA Yukon Broadband Telecommunications Project, Environmental Assessment, DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2014-0004-EA. Released for public review on 9/28/15-10/27/15.