

**United States Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management**

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**Environmental Assessment: DOI-BLM-MT-0010-2014-0025-EA**  
(Eplanning # DOI-BLM-MT-A010-2014-0002-EA)  
**Case File Number: MTM 107717**

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**Finding of No Significant Impact**

**Columbus Rapelje-Chrome Junction 100 kV Transmission  
Line**

*Location: Stillwater County, Montana*

*Applicant/Address: Northwestern Energy/ 40 East Broadway, Butte, Montana 59701*

U.S. Department of the Interior  
Bureau of Land Management  
Billings Field Office  
5001 Southgate Drive  
Billings, Montana 59101  
Phone: (406) 896-5013  
FAX: (406) 896-5281

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## **Finding of No Significant Impact Billings Field Office**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has conducted an environmental analysis (DOI-BLM-MT-0010-2014-0025-EA) to address the environmental consequences of 0.88 mile of the Columbus Rapelje-Chrome Junction 100 kV Transmission Line Project (Project) that would cross BLM-administered land in Stillwater County, Montana. The new 100 kV electric transmission line would connect Northwestern Energy's (NWE) existing Columbus Rapelje Substation located approximately 15 miles north of Columbus, Montana to a new substation that would be located near Nye, Montana. The underlying need to upgrade transmission structure to adapt to load growth and meet the reliability standards of the North American Electrical Reliability Corporation (NERC) and the Western Electricity Coordinating Council (WECC) would be met while accomplishing the following objectives:

- 1) Solve the voltage problems in the area;
- 2) Support anticipated growth in electric capacity demand;
- 3) Maximize use of existing access roads; and
- 4) Have manageable environmental effects.

The 6.4 acre Project Area (0.88 mile by 60 foot wide) on BLM land located on the east side of the Beartooth Mountains 34 miles northwest of Red Lodge, includes Bad Canyon Creek which originates in the Custer National Forest and flows easterly to its confluence with the Stillwater River. Most of the Project Area burned in the 2006 Derby wildfire which significantly affected the shrub, forest, and grassland vegetation. EA# DOI-BLM-MT-0010-2014-0025 is attached and is incorporated by reference for this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). A no action alternative and one action alternative (Proposed Action) were analyzed in the EA.

### **PLAN CONFORMANCE AND CONSISTENCY:**

The Proposed Action and No Action Alternatives addressed in this EA are in conformance with the Billings Resource Management Plan (RMP) and Rocky Mountain Region Record of Decision, approved in September, 2015 (BLM 2015).

The Proposed Action is within the area analyzed by the RMP and EIS, September 2015. The RMP was reviewed to determine if the Proposed Action conforms to the land use plan terms and conditions as required by Title 43 CFR, Part 1610.5. The Proposed Action is in conformance with the 2015 Billings RMP. According to this RMP, the Proposed Action is not within an ROW Exclusion Area, but is within an Avoidance Area. Section 2.3 of the EA describes all of the potential measures that were considered to avoid this area and why they were not feasible. Land use authorizations (ROW, leases, permits, easements) are considered on a case-by-case basis and in accordance with

recommendations in this RMP/Final EIS (Goal R/RLP 1 and MD R/RLP-1). There are no special designations within the area of the Proposed Action.

The Project proposal qualifies as a ROW and may be permitted under the authority of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA), Section 501, as amended. Applicable regulations for the Proposed Action, under this authority, are contained within Title 43 CFR, Part 2800.

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT DETERMINATION:**

Based upon a review of the EA and the supporting documents, I have determined that the Project is not a major federal action and will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the general area. No environmental effects meet the definition of significance in context or intensity as defined in 40 CFR 1508.27 and do not exceed those effects described in the Billings Resource Management Plan (BLM 2015). Therefore, an EIS is not needed. This finding is based on the context and intensity of the project as described below.

**Context:** The Project is a site-specific action directly involving approximately 6.4 acres of BLM administered land that by itself does not have international, national, regional, or state-wide importance. There are no other current or future planned actions in or near the Project that would affect the same environmental resources as the Project.

**Intensity:** The following discussion is organized around the Ten Significance Criteria described in 40 CFR 1508.27 and incorporated into BLM's Critical Elements of the Human Environment list (H-1790-1), and supplemental Instruction Memorandum, Acts, regulations and Executive Orders. The following have been considered in evaluating intensity for this proposal:

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

The Proposed Action would affect resources as described in the EA. Adverse impacts include minor impacts to visual resources, recreation, wilderness characteristics. Short term impacts to vegetation, and wildlife would occur temporarily during construction. Long term impacts would be limited in scope. Beneficial impacts include economic benefits in the local community. Mitigating measures to reduce impacts to the various resources, including vegetation, stream and wetland habitat, water quality, noxious weed spread, wildlife, and wilderness characteristics, were incorporated in the design of the action alternative. None of the environmental effects discussed in detail in the EA and associated appendices are considered significant, nor do the effects exceed those described in the Billings RMP/FEIS.

**2. The degree to which the selected alternative will affect public health or safety.**

There are no known public health or safety issues associated with the action alternative.

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

Within the Project Area, there are no known historical or cultural resources, no park lands, no prime farm lands, and no ecologically critical areas. Wetlands in the Project Area include riverine and riparian forested wetland; impacts would be avoided by spanning or avoiding crossing these areas. Bad Canyon Creek has been determined to be eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River system (NWSRS) due to the presence of excellent fish habitat, a core population of Yellowstone cutthroat trout, and the scenic, isolated character of the canyon. But it has not been recommended as suitable for management, since the cutthroat trout population could be further enhanced and protected under existing cooperative efforts without inclusion in the NWSRS. The core population is located upstream of a significant natural barrier and is located approximately five miles upstream of the Project Area. The Proposed Action will span Bad Canyon Creek and measures will be implemented to avoid erosion and stream sedimentation. The Bad Canyon BLM parcel has been found to have wilderness characteristics, but the parcel is not managed as a wildland unit. The specific resource values identified in the wilderness inventory have management direction and prescriptions in the Billings RMP/FEIS. The potential impacts to specific resource values contributing to scenic and wilderness characteristics would be minimized by specific mitigation measures identified in the EA. None of these characteristics would be significantly impacted because best management practices (BMPs) and mitigation measures incorporated into the Proposed Action as specified will minimize identified resource concerns.

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

There is no scientific controversy over the nature of the impacts.

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

The Project is not unique or unusual. The BLM has experience implementing similar actions in similar areas. The environmental effects to the human environment are fully analyzed in the EA. There are no predicted effects on the human environment that are considered to be highly uncertain or involve unique 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.**

This Project neither establishes a precedent nor represents a decision in principle about future actions. The actions considered in the selected alternative were considered by the interdisciplinary team within the context of past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions. Significant cumulative effects are not predicted. A complete analysis of the direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of the action and no action alternatives is described in Chapter 3 of the EA.

- 7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts – which include connected actions regardless of land ownership.**

The interdisciplinary team evaluated the possible actions in context of past, present and reasonably foreseeable actions. Significant cumulative effects are not predicted, because permanent impacts to Bad Canyon would be minor and no future actions are planned in Bad Canyon. A complete disclosure of the effects of the Project is contained in Chapter 3 of the EA.

- 8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or other 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 historical resources.**

The Project will not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or other objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, nor will it cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. A cultural inventory has been completed for the Proposed Action, and no cultural resources were found within the Project Area. Two cultural resources were identified within the Bad Canyon Unit, located 0.9 and 1.3 miles outside of the Project Area. No impacts to either of the sites would be anticipated as a result of the implementation of the Proposed Action.

- 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, or the degree to which the action may adversely affect: 1) a proposed to be listed endangered or threatened species or its habitat, or 2) a species on BLM's sensitive species list.**

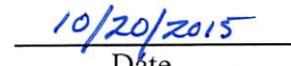
Mitigating measures to reduce impacts to wildlife and fisheries have been incorporated into the design of the action alternative. One listed threatened species, grizzly bear, is known to occur near Bad Canyon. There would be no impacts to the grizzly bear because it is not likely to utilize the Project Area other than as an occasional migrant due to the fact that it is outside of the grizzly bear recovery zone and the habitat alteration that has occurred due to the Derby fire. Construction crews would be required to minimize bear attractants during construction.

One BLM sensitive species is known to occur near Bad Canyon, a core population of Yellowstone cutthroat trout occurs in Bad Canyon Creek, upstream of the Project Area's proposed ROW crossing of the creek. However, the core population would not be effected because Bad Canyon would be spanned by the transmission line downstream of the population, and potential for sedimentation will be minimized through BMPs described in the EA. The Project Area is within the historic range of the BLM sensitive greater sage-grouse, and sagebrush communities along the rim of Bad Canyon could provide habitat; however the Derby wildfire modified habitats in the Project Area and the nearest BLM-designated sage-grouse Priority Protection or General Habitat Areas are greater than 15 miles away. The Project would not significantly affect sage-grouse because regular sage-grouse occurrence in the Bad Canyon area is not likely, BMPs would avoid and minimize potential impacts to sage-grouse, and if active sage-grouse leks are identified near the Project, avoidance recommendations from the 2014 Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program would be implemented. No other threatened or endangered plants or animals are known to occur in the Project Area.

**10. Whether the action threatens a violation of a federal, state, local, or tribal law, regulation or policy imposed for the protection of the environment, where non-federal requirements are consistent with federal requirements.**

The Project does not violate any known federal, state, local or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment. State, local, and tribal interests were, or will be, given the opportunity to participate in the environmental analysis process. The Crow Tribe was consulted via certified letter on August 7, 2015 (to the Tribal Chairman and the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer) and given the opportunity to comment on the preliminary EA. No response has been received to date. In addition, the project is consistent with applicable land management plans, policies, and programs.

  
Authorized Officer

  
Date