



# United States Department of the Interior

## BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

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### **Finding of No Significant Impacts**

DOI-BLM-NM-A020-2014-0021-EA

### **Arizona Interconnection Project Access Roads Permitting**

#### **INTRODUCTION:**

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has conducted an environmental analysis (DOI-BLM-NM-A020-2014-0021-Environmental Assessment) addressing the El Paso Electric Company's (EPE or Applicant) application to amend their existing 345kV transmission line Right-of-Way (ROW). The transmission line extends from a tie-in point just east of the Luna Substation near Deming, New Mexico, to the Red Hill tie-in point in western New Mexico, east of the Arizona-New Mexico border and 12 miles east of the Springerville Switchyard near Springerville, Arizona. The transmission line crosses lands administered by the BLM, United States Forest Service (Forest Service), State of New Mexico, and private lands.

The Environmental Assessment (EA) assesses the potential environmental impacts resulting from EPE's proposed action to use the footprint of the original construction roads to the greatest extent practicable, and to improve and maintain clear access to support routine patrol and maintenance of the transmission line facilities; and minimize the time and cost for both EPE and regulatory agencies associated with individual access requests. The underlying need for the proposal would be met while accomplishing the following objectives:

1. Respond to the Applicant's request for an amended right-of-way grant.
2. Fulfill the multiple-use mandate outlined in Title V of The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, *As Amended*.
3. Comply with BLM's objective to grant rights-of-way and to control right-of-way use on public lands, 43 CFR 2801.2.

The *Arizona Interconnection Project Access Roads Permitting* project EA (DOI-BLM-NM-A020-2014-0021-EA) is attached. A no action Alternative and two Alternative actions were analyzed in the EA. Additional Alternatives considered but eliminated from detailed analysis were also thoroughly considered in the EA.

## **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT:**

Based on the analysis of potential environmental impacts contained in the attached EA, and considering the significance criteria in 40 CFR 1508.27, I have determined that the Alternatives considered in DOI-BLM-NM-A020-2014-0021-EA will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment, individually or cumulatively with other actions in the general area. No environmental effects from any Alternative assessed or evaluated meet the definition of significance in context or intensity, as defined by 43 CFR 1508.27; nor do they exceed those effects as described in the 2010 Socorro Field Office (SFO) Resource Management Plan (RMP), the 1986 Las Cruces District Office (LCDO) White Sands RMP, and the 1986 Gila National Forest, Forest Plan as amended. An environmental impact statement is therefore not required. This finding is based on the context and intensity of the project as described below.

### **Context:**

The Applicant is applying for amendments to right-of-way grants NMNM 057058 and NMNM 77514 with the BLM and reissuance of the Special Use Permit QRS4071 with the Forest Service for access to and along the existing Arizona Interconnection Project (AIP) 345-kilovolt (kV) transmission line to facilitate long term maintenance and operation of transmission line facilities. The AIP transmission line contains 1,163 transmission structures and extends 213 miles from a tie-in point just east of the Luna Substation near Deming, New Mexico, to the Red Hill tie-in point 12 miles east of the Springerville Switchyard near Springerville, Arizona. EPE received right-of-way grants NMNM 057058 (southern half) and NMNM 77514 (northern half), on September 16, 1988, and October 11, 1988, respectively, from the BLM, and a Special Use Permit on September 21, 1988 (superseded on February 06, 1991), from the Forest Service. The AIP transmission line was constructed shortly afterward. The right-of-way grants and special use permit authorized the temporary use of public lands to construct temporary access roads and storage yards that were utilized for access during the two-year period of construction for the AIP transmission line. Temporary access roads to and along the right-of-way, as well as to most structures, were cleared and built to facilitate construction of the transmission line. Upon completion of construction activities, these roads were rehabilitated.

Under the current grant conditions, EPE consults with either or both of the Forest Service and BLM each time maintenance needs arise. EPE submits a request to the appropriate agency and provides a specific plan of action. The federal agency then circulates the proposed action for review by resource specialists who identify potentially affected resources. Requests are most frequently for improvement of access conditions, including vegetation clearing and grading, to allow the necessary vehicles safe access to the right-of-way and structures to conduct requisite maintenance. Depending on the intensity of a proposed action, EPE is generally required to provide specific localized information for biological, cultural, or other sensitive resources in advance of any ground disturbing

activity. The extent of access improvement or potential ground disturbance is based on site-specific field conditions and the type of equipment necessary to conduct a particular activity.

To evaluate each maintenance access request individually is cost and time prohibitive. In many cases, EPE has short windows of opportunity to conduct this work, and the necessary environmental review process could delay needed maintenance activities. Permitting access routes for the AIP transmission line would provide agency and EPE staff the necessary planning information regarding known environmental resource constraints, and would allow EPE more timely access to conduct necessary maintenance to comply with regulatory standards and ensure the safe and reliable delivery of service. EPE proposes to use the footprint of the original construction roads to the greatest extent practicable, and to improve and maintain clear access to support routine patrol and maintenance of the transmission line facilities; and minimize the time and cost for both the Company and regulatory agencies associated with individual access requests. It is for these reasons that EPE is requesting this right-of-way amendment.

**Intensity:**

The following discussion is organized around the Ten Significance Criteria described in 40 CFR 1508.27 and incorporated into resources and issues considered (includes supplemental authorities Appendix 1 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 impact resources as described in the EA. Mitigating measures to reduce impacts to powerline access and maintenance are incorporated in the design features of the Alternatives. 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 relevant plans listed above.

**2. The degree to which the selected Alternative will affect public health or safety.** The proposed action is written to comply with Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations and El Paso Electric's mandated Safety Manual (2013); any Alternative would follow the required guidance outlined in the EA. Air quality was analyzed in the EA and identified as rural without any major point or area sources of air pollutants. There would be no new adverse social or economic effects.

**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.** The historic and cultural resources of the area have been inventoried and mitigation will be incorporated into the Plan of Development and Decision Record of the selected Alternative. Mitigation will be required for all National Register of Historic Properties (NRHP) eligible sites within the impact area of the selected alternative.

**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.** The actions considered in the analyzed Alternatives 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 selected Alternative and all other Alternatives is described in Chapter 4 of the EA. The preferred Alternative does not establish a precedent for future action with significant effects; the construction, operation and maintenance of the access roads to the EPE transmission line will improve and enhance an ongoing activity (use of the line).

**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. A complete disclosure of the effects of the project is contained in Chapter 4 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.** As stated above, this project will have an adverse effect on several historic properties (properties eligible for or listed in the National Register of Historic Places) which are in the area of potential effects for this project. However, these adverse effects will be resolved, or mitigated through an MOA and a HPTP. These measures will ensure that there is no loss of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

**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.** Design features which reduce impacts to federally listed species and BLM sensitive species have been incorporated into the Alternatives.

**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 given the opportunity to participate in the environmental analysis process. Furthermore, pre-scoping letters were sent to fifteen Native American tribes concerning consulting party status, and there were two responses from tribes. In addition, the project is consistent with applicable land management plans, policies, and programs.

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Field Manager

Date