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Bureau of Land Management
Southwest District Office, Colorado

Tri-State Montrose-Nucla-Cahone Transmission Line
Improvement Project

Environmental Assessment
DOI-BLM-CO-S000-2013-0001
Casefile number: COC-66840

Public and Agency Scoping Report
November 2014

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Section 1. Introduction and Background

Project Overview

Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association, Inc. (Tri-State, proponent) is a wholesale electric power producer/supplier that serves 44 rural electric cooperatives and public power districts in Colorado, New Mexico, Wyoming, and Nebraska. Tri-State's transmission system in southwestern Colorado relies on a number of 115-kilovolt (kV) circuits including the Montrose,-Nucla-Cahone transmission line.

Tri-State has submitted applications to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (FS), (collectively referred to as the agencies), for authorizations to rebuild, operate, and maintain the existing Montrose-Nucla-Cahone (MNC) 115-kV transmission line to a 230-kV transmission line. The proponent has identified a need to replace the existing MNC 115-kV transmission line for the following reasons:

- a. The line, constructed with wooden poles in 1958, has exceeded its expected lifespan of 50 years. The aging infrastructure has resulted in increasing maintenance and repair costs. Many of the poles have rot, woodpecker and insect damage, and cracks. Insulators are chipped/gun shot, and conductor wires are frayed and damaged from gun shots. Section of the wire hang too low during high load times and require maintenance to meet North American Energy Reliability Council standards. Local crews are unable to keep up with accelerating maintenance needs on the aging infrastructure and specialized maintenance crews and equipment are needed for conductor, hardware, insulator, and shieldwire replacement.
- b. Energy loads are projected to increase. The existing system is incapable of serving cumulative loads exceeding a 35 megawatt addition. Studies of the performance, reliability, and load serving capabilities of the line, and the overall performance of the electrical grid in southwestern Colorado result in the proponent's conclusion that rebuilding the MNC line to 230-kV would meet current and expected power needs in the region. The increased power need requires line construction in 2017 and 2018.

If approved, the line would be rebuilt to 230-kV using primarily wooden H-frame structures; some self-supporting steel structures would be used. The H-frame structures would be approximately 25 feet taller and 10 feet wider than the existing poles. Tri-State proposes to use the existing 115-kV 100-foot right-of-way (ROW) for the rebuild to the greatest extent possible. The new 230-kV transmission line would require an additional 50 foot of ROW clearing for a total of 150 feet wide corridor. The rebuild would consist of the following components:

- A 230-kV transmission line from the existing Montrose Substation west of Montrose, Colorado to a new Nucla 230-kV Substation.
- A 230-kV transmission line from a new Nucla 230-kV Substation to the existing Cahone Substation near Dove Creek. Colorado.

- Double circuit structures between a new Nucla 230-kV Substation and existing Nucla 115-kV Substation at the Nucla Power Plan. The double circuit would consist of the existing Sunshine-Nucla 115-kV line and the new 230-kV Nucla to Cahone section of the MNC transmission line.
- A new substation near the existing Nucla Substation and power plant, near Nucla, Colorado. The new substation would be called the Nucla 230-kV Substation.
- Expansion and equipment additions to the existing Montrose Substation (on Tri-State property) to accommodate the new 230-kV circuit.
- Expansion and equipment additions to the existing Cahone Substation (on Tri-State property) to accommodate the new 230-kV circuit.
- A possible deviation from the existing route to avoid canyon walls near the Cahone Substation.
- A possible deviation from the existing route of the transmission line at the crossing of the Dolores River Canyon to minimize tower height, span length, and line construction, repair and maintenance in areas with steep slopes and unstable soils.
- A possible deviation from the existing route of the transmission line in the Dry Creek Basin that may reduce impacts to Gunnison sage-grouse.
- Existing access routes that are used for maintenance of the project would be used, with any necessary modifications to accommodate construction vehicle widths/lengths, for construction of the new rebuilt transmission line.
- Pending final engineering design, additional spur routes could be needed for construction and long term operation/maintenance of the line, and tower locations could change due to the spans between towers increasing from the 115-kV tower spacing.
- Removal of the existing 115-kV towers during construction.

If approved, Tri-State plans to construct the Project in two segments and time periods, beginning with construction of the Nucla Substation and the Nucla to Cahone segment in 2017, followed by the Nucla to Montrose segment in 2018. In 2016, a network of existing access routes used to maintain the 115-kV transmission line would be improved as needed for use in construction and maintaining the 230-kV transmission line.

Project Location

The transmission line originates at the Montrose Substation, southwest of Montrose, Colorado and terminates at the Cahone Substation, east of Dove Creek, Colorado. The transmission line is about 80 miles long with approximately 40 miles of additional roads outside of transmission line ROW. The transmission line is located in Dolores, San Miguel, Montrose, and Ouray counties, in Colorado. About 105 miles are located on Federal land (59.1 miles on BLM managed lands and 46.4 miles on FS managed lands). See the project maps on the BLM website (<http://blm.gov/dvld>) for additional location information.

Agency Purpose and Need

As the designated Lead Federal Agency, BLM Southwest District Office has determined that an Environmental Assessment (EA) is required before the agencies can render decisions on the proposed Project. The FS is a cooperating agency in the EA, and will issue a separate decision to authorize work on National Forest System lands. The EA must comply with the National

Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 as amended, the Environmental Quality Improvement Act of 1970, and all other applicable laws, Executive Orders, regulations, and direction. Based on the NEPA analysis, the agencies will decide whether to 1) approve the proposed Project, 2) not approve the Project, or 3) approve the Project with modification and, if approved, under what terms and conditions.

The purpose of the agencies' joint analysis is to analyze and respond to Tri-State's applications in a timely manner, identifying any permit conditions necessary for resource protection and public safety. The agencies' purpose is tied to the following laws, Memorandum(s) of Understanding, and Executive Orders:

- Title 5 of the Federal Land Policy Management Act of 1976, as amended (FLPMA), (43 United States Code [U.S.C.] 1761) give authority to both agencies to grant, issue or renew right-of-ways for electrical transmission lines.
- Westwide Energy Corridor (WVEC) MOU dated October 2009, created under authority of the Energy Policy Act of 2005, requires federal agencies including the Department of Energy, Department of Agriculture, and Department of Interior, among others, to coordinate efforts in the siting and permitting process of electric transmission facilities on federal land.
- Section Two of Executive Order 13212: Requires agencies to expedite their review of energy-related permits or take other actions as necessary to accelerate the completion of such projects, while maintaining safety, public health, and environmental protections. Agencies shall take such action to the extent permitted by law and regulation, and where appropriate.

The BLM's need for the proposed action is to respond to a request from Tri-State, as required under Title 5 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, (43 U.S.C. 1761), as amended (FLPMA), to gain access across public lands. The FS is responding to a request for a new special use permit (SUP). The FS has primary responsibility to issue special use authorizations for ROW on National Forest System lands under the FLMPA. The FS proposes to authorize and subsequently issue a SUP with terms and conditions for the construction, maintenance, and operation of a 230-kV transmission line.

Overview of Public Involvement Process

Public involvement is a vital and legal component of the EA process. Public involvement vests the public in the decision-making process and allows for full environmental disclosure. Guidance for implementing public involvement under NEPA is codified in 40 CFR Section 1506.6, thereby ensuring that federal agencies make a diligent effort to involve the public in the NEPA process.

Scoping is an early and open process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed and identifying the significant issues related to a proposed action. Information collected during scoping may also be used to develop the alternatives to be evaluated in detail in a NEPA document. The process has two components: internal scoping and external scoping. Internal scoping is conducted within an agency or cooperating agencies to determine preliminary and anticipated issues and concerns. The BLM NEPA Handbook (Section 6.3.1) states that,

“internal scoping is simply the use of BLM and cooperating agency staff to help determine what needs to be analyzed in a NEPA document. Internal scoping is an interdisciplinary process; at a minimum, use scoping to define issues, alternatives, and data needs. Additionally, this is an opportunity to identify other actions that may be analyzed in the same NEPA document” (BLM 2008).

External scoping is a public process designed to reach beyond the BLM, USFS and other cooperating agencies and identify the concerns of high importance to the public. External scoping helps ensure that real problems are identified early and properly studied, that issues of no concern do not consume time and effort, and that the proposed action and alternatives are balanced, thorough, and able to be implemented. As stated in the BLM NEPA Handbook (Section 6.3.2), *“External scoping can be used to identify coordination needs with other agencies; refine issues through public, tribal and agency feedback on preliminary issues; and identify new issues and possible alternatives. Tribal consultation centers on established government-to-government relationships, and it is important that you allow sufficient time and use the appropriate means of contacting tribes when conducting scoping. External scoping serves to build agency credibility and promote constructive dialogue and relations with tribes, agencies, local governments and the public” (BLM 2008).*

Public involvement is being conducted in the following phases for the Tri-State MNC Transmission Improvement Project environmental review process:

- Public scoping prior to NEPA analysis to determine the scope of issues and alternatives to be addressed (complete: May 5 to June 4 2014)
- Public outreach, news releases, and newspaper advertisements (as needed)
- Collaboration with federal, state, local, and tribal governments, and cooperating agencies (ongoing)
- Public review of and comment on the Preliminary EA, which analyzes likely environmental effects of the proposed action and alternatives (anticipated Spring 2015)

This scoping summary report documents the results of the public involvement process beginning with public scoping.

Public Involvement Details

The BLM follows the public involvement requirements documented in the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations implementing NEPA (40 CFR 1501.7 for scoping and 1506.6 for public involvement). The BLM also follows public involvement requirements described in the BLM’s planning regulations (43 CFR 1601-1610 [BLM 2005]) and NEPA handbook (BLM 2008). The BLM solicits comments from relevant agencies and the public, organizes and analyzes all comments received, and then distills them to identify issues that will be addressed during the EA process. These issues define the scope of, and are used to develop, the project alternatives. The following involvement activities were conducted for the Tri-State MNC Transmission Improvement Project.

Mailing list and Letters to Interested Parties

Public scoping comments were solicited via a letter dated May 5, 2014, that was mailed to the appropriate agencies, specific interested parties, and to the general public. The letter announced the opportunity for public input and initiated the start of the scoping period.

Press Releases and Website Posting

The letter was also posted on the BLM Uncompahgre website (http://www.blm.gov/co/st/en/district_offices/southwest/TriState230kVRebuild.html). Maps and frequently asked questions (FAQs) also were published on the BLM website. The 30-day Public Scoping Period ended June 4, 2014. Letters to interested parties were mailed to approximately 900 addresses. Legal Notices (see Appendix A) were posted in the 2 local newspapers of record and the BLM and Forest Service websites were updated to include project information. The scoping period yielded 20 submittals. BLM will address scoping comments in the EA analysis. All interested party letters are included in Appendix A, Scoping and Public Notice Materials.

Cooperating Agencies

A cooperating agency is any federal, state, or local government agency or Indian tribe that enters into a formal agreement with the lead federal agency to help develop an EA. More specifically, cooperating agencies “work with the BLM, sharing knowledge and resources, to achieve desired outcomes for public lands and communities within statutory and regulatory frameworks” (BLM Land Use Planning Handbook H-1601-1 [BLM 2005]). The benefits of enhanced collaboration among agencies in preparing NEPA analyses are:

- Disclosing relevant information early in the analytical process
- Applying available technical expertise and staff support
- Avoiding duplication with other federal, state, tribal, and local procedures
- Establishing a mechanism for addressing intergovernmental issues

The BLM invited several cooperating agencies to participate in the Tri-State MNC Transmission Improvement EA including:

- Bureau of Indian Affairs, Southwest Regional Office
- Bureau of Reclamation
- City of Montrose
- Colorado Department of Natural Resources
- Colorado Dept of Natural Resources- Parks and Wildlife
- Colorado Dept of Transportation, Region 5
- Colorado Dept of Transportation, Office of Policy and Government Relations
- Colorado Energy Office
- Dolores County
- Montrose County
- National Park Service- Mesa Verde National Park
- Ouray County

- San Miguel County
- Town of Dolores
- Town of Dove Creek
- Town of Naturita
- Town of Norwood
- Town of Nucla
- USACE
- U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Western Colorado FO
- USDA, Rural Utilities Service

To date, seven agencies are participating in the NEPA process as with the BLM: San Juan National Forest, GMUG National Forest, USDA RUS, San Miguel County, Montrose County, Dolores County, and the Colorado Energy Office.

Interactions with the cooperating agencies will include periodic briefings and reviews of preliminary internal draft sections of text. The BLM will continue to engage the cooperating agencies throughout the preparation of the EA.

Collaboration and Consultation with Tribes

The Uncompahgre Field Office has initiated consultation with tribes that are identified as having interest or Traditional Cultural Properties in the planning area, and consultation is ongoing throughout the NEPA process. Consultation will be in compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act and the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. The identified tribes are:

- Jicarilla Apache Nation
- Pueblo de Cochiti
- Pueblo of Acoma
- Pueblo of Isleta
- Pueblo of Jemez
- Pueblo of Kewa
- Pueblo of Laguna
- Pueblo of Nambe
- Pueblo of Ohkay Owingeh
- Pueblo of Picuris
- Pueblo of Pojoaque
- Pueblo of San Felipe
- Pueblo of San Ildefonso
- Pueblo of Sandia
- Pueblo of Santa Ana
- Pueblo of Santa Clara
- Pueblo of Taos
- Pueblo of Tesuque
- Pueblo of Zia
- Pueblo of Zuni

- Southern Ute Indian Tribe
- The Hopi Tribe
- The Navajo Nation
- Ute Mountain Ute Tribe
- Ute Tribe of the Uintah & Ouray Reservation

Section 2. Scoping Comment Summary

Method of Comment Collection and Analysis

As noted previously, the 30-day Public Scoping Period ended June 4, 2014. A total of 17 scoping comments were received; 1 was received outside of the scoping comment period. An additional 4 letters requesting address changes were also received. The most common format used for submission was electronic mail. Submissions were also mailed via U.S. Mail.

A list of summarized comments is shown in Table 1. All submissions are available for public review at the BLM Southwest District Office, Montrose, Colorado. Scoping comments were coded once for each letter (i.e., if a scoping comment was made several times in one letter, it was counted once for purposes of the summary). In general, scoping comments focused on alternatives and mitigation/avoidance measures, concerns about visual impacts of the proposed new Dolores River crossing, wildlife impacts from the existing line and proposed re-routes (primarily Gunnison sage-grouse, big game, and raptors), and health and safety issues.

Table 1. Public and Agency Scoping Comment Summary.

Issue Category	Scoping Comment
1	Purpose and Need
1a	Analysis needs to describe Tri-State’s larger plan for the region better and better justify the need for the project.
1b	Analysis needs to describe and justify why the larger (50-foot) ROW is required/proposed.
1c	Analysis needs to justify purpose and need for relocation of Dolores river crossing
2	Alternatives and Options
2a	EA will need to describe where the Nucla substation will be located and its potential impacts.
2b	EA needs to identify existing route upgrades and new access routes
2c	Concerns about new alignment of Dolores River Crossing; EA will need to identify location of line and access
2d	Suggest burying line in Dry Creek Basin
2e	Suggest moving some of the Parallel Trail out from under the power lines
2f	Suggest straightening line to avoid “dog leg” on their property
2g	Suggest incorporating weed control measures, including limiting ground disturbance, native seed mixes, monitoring, and others.

Issue Category	Scoping Comment
2h	Suggest implementing timing restrictions during winter range use by deer and elk (avoid December 1 through April 1).
2i	Suggest implementing timing restrictions during hunting season.
2j	Suggest implementing construction buffers for riparian/aquatic habitats and minimizing disturbance using CPW-recommended best management practices
2k	Suggest completing raptor surveys and implement raptor avoidance buffers during construction
2l	Recommend implementing bald eagle avoidance buffers for active winter roosts during November 15 to March 15
2m	Recommend using Avian Power Line Interaction Committee design and practice recommendations to protect raptors
2n	Recommends moving transmission line from current alignment in Dry Creek Basin to a buried alignment in the Highway 141 corridor to reduce impacts to Gunnison sage-grouse
2o	Recommend compensatory Gunnison sage-grouse habitat mitigation through protection or enhancement of habitat
2p	Request for additional information regarding size, position, landowner compensation and schedule for Montrose substation expansion and associated power line upgrade.
3	Human and Visual Resources
3a	Visual Resource management analysis must include aesthetic impacts to river recreation from alternative Dolores River crossing alignment and larger structures/facilities throughout project
3b	Analyze impacts to Lands with Wilderness Character from alternative Dolores River crossing alignment
3c	Analyze impacts to cultural resources from alternative Dolores River crossing alignment as well as rest of corridor
3d	South Buck Trail, Parallel Trail, and Powerline Trail cross or parallel the power line within the project area.
3e	Construction of powerline improvements would only temporarily disrupt the use of mountain bike trails as long as trails restored to current condition
3f	Concerns about impacts to hunting due to construction impacts on deer and elk populations as well as construction during hunting season.
3g	Concerns about property values
3h	Concerns about noise disturbance
3i	Concerns about EMF and health implications
4	Natural Resources
4a	Analyze impacts to bighorn sheep and other terrestrial wildlife from alternative Dolores River crossing alignment
4b	Analyze impacts to raptors from alternative Dolores River crossing alignment
4c	Concerns about increases in invasive species.
4d	Recommend GUSG population studies and avoidance of active leks during nesting season.

Issue Category	Scoping Comment
4e	Concerns about construction, operation and maintenance impacts to GUSG, and feasibility of the project due to those adverse effects. Particular concerns are related to the “additional vehicle access routes proposed” and adequate mitigation measures.
4f	Concerns about habitat fragmentation
4g	Concerns about elk production areas and winter range, and mule deer winter range.
4h	Concerns about impacts to riparian/aquatic habitat and associated wildlife uses
4i	Concerns about impacts to raptors and raptor nests
4j	Concerns about impacts to bald eagle winter concentration areas and roost sites
4k	Concerns about impacts to Dry Creek Basin GUSG population, transplantation efforts and leks from existing line including habitat fragmentation and predation
4l	Concerns about impacts of new clearing to wintering elk in the East Pines area within the Dolores River Canyon new crossing alignment
4m	Concerns about EMF and environmental/wildlife health implications
5	Physical Resources (place holder for potential future comments)
6	General
6a	Concerns about adequacy of NEPA analysis; suggest EIS required since original line was built over 50 years ago and crosses the Dolores Canyon Wilderness Study Area.
6b	Concerns about appropriate and timely communication with landowners and private land owner rights
6c	Cannot support a project/company that uses coal; need to focus on gas and renewables
6d	Letter in support of project
6e	Suggestion to develop solar and geothermal energy
6f	Use Dove Creek Press for public notices
6g	Ensure that project complies with San Miguel County Land Use Code Section 2-12: Scenic Quality.
6h	Ensure that project complies with San Miguel County Land Use Code Section 5-709: Public Utilities Structures and Electricity Transmission and Distribution lines.
6i	Request that public review EA be released prior to land use permitting applications
6j	Request that construction activities be coordinated through BOR-Western Colorado Area Office and Uncompahgre Valley Water Users Association.
6k	Design and safety standards, coordination, review, and approvals required in proximity to Western’s power lines

Written Submissions by Affiliation

Not counting the requests for address changes, a total of 16 letters or e-mails were received in the official scoping period in response to scoping. Another comment letter was received after the

scoping period. Additionally, 14 responses to cooperating agency invitations were received, and are not included in the letter summaries below. Six cooperating agency responses are included in Appendix B. Two comment documents were received from a single submitter and are counted toward the total.

Table 2. Scoping Comments by Commenter Affiliation

Affiliation	Number of Comment Letters	Percentage of Total Comment Letters
Government	4	22
<i>Federal</i>	1	6
<i>State</i>	1	6
<i>Local</i>	2	11
Organizations/NGOs*	4	22
Businesses**	2	12
Individuals	7	41
Total	17	100%

*2 separate comment documents submitted by a single entity

**One comment received outside of scoping comment period.

Written Submissions by Geographic Area

Most letters were received from Colorado, with one from New Mexico. Less than half of the letters were from within the planning region, including Montrose, Ouray, San Miguel, and Dolores counties. Half of the letters were from outside the planning region, but still on the Western Slope of Colorado.

Table 3. Scoping Comments by Commenter Affiliation

Affiliation	Number of Comment Letters	Percentage of Total Comment Letters
Within Planning Region	7	39
<i>Montrose County</i>	4	22
<i>Ouray County</i>	0	0
<i>San Miguel County</i>	1	6
<i>Dolores County</i>	2	11
Outside Planning Region (CO)	9	55
<i>Montezuma County</i>	3	21
<i>La Plata County</i>	4	22
<i>Mesa County</i>	1	6
<i>Jefferson County</i>	1	6
Outside Planning Region (NM)	1	6
Total	17	100%

Anticipated Decisions

This scoping report does not include any decisions, nor does it change current management. Instead, it summarizes those issues identified during the scoping period. The BLM will use

comments summarized in this scoping report, along with subsequently identified issues and other information, to help formulate a range of reasonable alternatives for the Tri-State Transmission Improvement Project, which would be analyzed in an EA as required under NEPA.

Valid Existing Management

The BLM- and FS-administered lands in the project area are managed with direction from:

- 1989 Uncompahgre Basin Resource Management Plan (RMP) and subsequent amendments.
- For the and San Juan National Forest (NF), the 2013 Tres Rios Field Office BLM and San Juan NF Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP)
- For BLM's Tres Rios Field Office, the 1985 San Juan/San Miguel RMP, as amended applies (as of October 6, 2014, BLM's Record of Decision for the 2013 Tres Rios Field Office BLM and San Juan NF LRMP has not been signed).
- 1985 Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison NF Forest Plan and subsequent amendments.

References

USDI Bureau of Land Management (BLM). 2008. National Environmental Policy Act; Handbook H-1790-1. Washington, D.C. January.

Appendix A: Scoping and Public Notice Materials

