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File Code: 2800 (COS000), COC-66840, FS 2700

Date: **SEP 02 2016**

Dear Interested Party;

The Final Environmental Assessment (EA) titled *Tri-State Montrose-Nucla-Cahone (MNC) Transmission Line Improvement Project* has been prepared to disclose and analyze the environmental effects of the Tri-State Montrose-Nucla-Cahone Transmission Line Improvement Project proposed by Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association, Inc. (Tri-State). Links to download the EA are found at the end of this letter.

Project Background

Tri-State submitted an application to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) for authorizations to rebuild the existing Montrose-Nucla-Cahone 115-kV transmission line to a 230-kV transmission line, and to operate and maintain the new 230-kV transmission line and fiber optic cable. The transmission line is located in Dolores, San Miguel, Montrose and Ouray Counties, in Colorado.

Tri-State will use primarily wooden H-frame structures which would be approximately 25 feet taller and 10 feet wider than the existing structures. Tri-State will 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 for a total of 150 foot-wide ROW. Tri-State will primarily use approximately 251 miles of roads not including state highways, currently used for the existing line. About 71 miles of these roads are down-line access located under the existing MNC line. Approximately 2.6 miles of new access/spur roads will be needed. Tri-State's proposed action also includes upgrades to the existing Cahone and Montrose substations and a new substation near Nucla, Colorado.

Details of the proposed project are presented in Tri-State's draft Plan of Development (Appendix D of the EA). The final Plan of Development will reflect the terms and condition for mitigation, construction, maintenance, and reclamation stipulated in the agencies' decision documents as well as any as-built variances incorporated into the completed project.

The EA analyzes Tri-State's Proposed Action, the No Action Alternative, and three combinations of BLM routing options. A total of four combinations of Action Alternatives were analyzed in the EA.

- Alternative A, Tri-State's Proposed Action: Upgrade-in-place with realignments at the Dolores River crossing and near the Cahone substation.



- Alternative B, No Action: In the No Action Alternative, the existing MNC 115-kV transmission line and associated access roads would remain and the transmission line would not be improved.
- Alternative C, BLM Routing Options:
 - Dolores River Crossing Routing Option: Alternative A incorporating an upgrade-in-place variation at Dolores River crossing;
 - Dry Creek Basin Routing Option: Alternative A incorporating a realignment parallel to State Highway 141 in Dry Creek Basin;
 - Both Routing Options: Alternative A incorporating the upgrade-in-place variation at Dolores River crossing and the realignment in Dry Creek Basin.

The EA has been prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. The BLM is the lead federal agency for the NEPA process and the USFS is a cooperating agency. Other cooperating agencies participating in the NEPA process are San Miguel, Dolores, and Montrose Counties and the Colorado Energy Office.

Finding of No Significant Impact and Identification of Agency Preferred Alternative

An EA provides analysis for determining whether to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement or a statement of “Finding of No Significant Impact” (FONSI). A draft FONSI, documenting the determination that the project does not have significant impacts, is attached to the Forest Service’s draft decision.

On November 3, 2015, the BLM and USFS issued a Preliminary EA and held a 30-day public comment period. A public meeting was held on November 23, 2015 in Dolores, Colorado. Sixty-five comment submissions were received. Responses to the comments are documented in Appendix F of the EA. Substantive changes to the EA, developed in response to public and agency comments, include the following:

- Additional detail on the Dry Creek Basin Routing Option;
- Additional baseline information and revised analysis for Gunnison sage-grouse;
- Additional discussion of designated and nominated Areas of Critical Environmental Concern;
- Updates to reflect additional detail and updates to Tri-State’s Plan of Development, notably further development of Gunnison sage-grouse conservation measures; and
- Identification of an agency preferred alternative.

Based on the analysis in the EA and after consideration of public comment on the Preliminary EA, the BLM and USFS have identified Alternative A, Tri-State’s proposed action, as the

agency preferred alternative. Identification of the agency preferred alternative in the EA does not constitute a decision.

Agency Decision Documents and Appeals and Objections

The USFS has issued a draft Decision Notice documenting the proposed approval of Alternative A, Tri-State's proposed action. The USFS final decision, in accord with the EA analysis, will inform the BLM Southwest District Manager whether to approve or deny Tri-State's application to amend ROW grants COC-66840 and COC-63427. The USFS decision includes the following elements:

- Approves issuance of a Special Use Authorization on National Forest System (NFS) lands for pre-construction testing, construction, operation and maintenance of Tri-State's rebuild of the Montrose-Nucla-Cahone Transmission Line, as proposed by Tri-State and identified as the agency preferred alternative in the EA. The proposed action and applicable Environmental Protection Measures are detailed in the Plan of Development (Appendix D of the EA).
- Requires the inclusion of all practical measures (project design features and applicable agency enforced Conditions of Approval) to avoid, minimize, or offset project-related effects in order to conserve and protect resources in the interest of the public as it relates to NFS lands.
- Does not authorize the initiation of surface disturbing activities on BLM or NFS lands. Initiation of ground disturbance activities may commence only upon issuance of a Notice to Proceed by the BLM and USFS.

The USFS draft decision is subject to a pre-decisional objection in accordance with the provisions of 36 CFR § 218 Subparts A and B. In order to meet the USFS requirement for objection eligibility on "specific written comments" you must have submitted comments during public scoping (held May 5 through June 4, 2014) or during the Preliminary EA comment period (held November 3 through December 2, 2015). Objections must be filed within 45 days of the publication of the legal notices in the *Grand Junction Daily Sentinel* (Grand Junction, CO) and the *Durango Herald* (Durango, CO) calculated by whichever notice publishes later. Further information on the objection process can be found in the USFS Decision Notice.

The minimum period for concluding the USFS objection period is 50 days following publication of the legal notice in the *Grand Junction Daily Sentinel* and the *Durango Herald*. Following conclusion of the USFS objection period, the BLM will issue a Decision Record and, if appropriate, amend the ROW grants. BLM's decision is subject to appeal (43 CFR Part 4). Ground disturbing activities cannot occur until the BLM and FS issue a Notice to Proceed (NTP). A NTP would not be issued until the final Plan of Development has been approved.

For Further Information

Further information and document links are available on the BLM project website at: <http://blm.gov/dvld> or the USFS Schedule of Proposed Actions and website at: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/gmug/landmanagement/projects>

If you have any questions or require additional information, please contact Southwest District NEPA Coordinator Gina Jones by phone at 970-240-5381, or by email at gmjones@blm.gov. Additional information about the USFS objection process can be obtained by contacting Liz Mauch by phone at (970) 240-5405 or by email to lmauch@fs.fed.us.

Sincerely,



BARBARA SHARROW

Southwest District Manager, Acting



SCOTT G. ARMENTROUT

Forest Supervisor