

United States Department of the Interior
Bureau of Reclamation
Interior Region 8: Lower Colorado Basin
Phoenix Area Office

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Babbitt Ranch Energy Center Interconnection Project, Arizona

Approved: _____

Alexander B. Smith, Area Manager
Phoenix Area Office
Bureau of Reclamation

Date: _____

FONSI No.: PXAO 22-03

Introduction

The Bureau of Reclamation has issued a Final Environmental Assessment (EA) that analyzed the environmental impacts of, and potential alternatives to, NextEra Energy Resources, LLC's proposed interconnection of the Babbitt Ranch Energy Center (BREC) to the Navajo Southern Transmission Systems (NSTS) at the Moenkopi to Cedar Mountain 500-kilovolt (kV) transmission line, referred to as the BREC Interconnection Project (the Proposed Action or Project), in Coconino County, Arizona. The Proposed Action would provide up to 160 megawatts of generation output from the BREC facility to the NSTS transmission line, which is operated by Arizona Public Service (APS).

The Project is located on a mixture of private land; the Kaibab National Forest (NF) and Arizona State Land Department. The interconnection facilities would include collection lines, a substation, switchyard, and an APS line tap. The Project also includes a 25-mile-long fiber-optic communication line to be located within the existing NSTS right-of-way (ROW). Approximately nine miles of the fiber-optic line would cross the Kaibab NF; therefore, the United States Forest Service (Forest Service) participated as a cooperating agency in the National Environmental Policy Act (Public Law 91-190) process.

Purpose and Need

As owner of a share of the NSTS, Reclamation's purpose for preparing the EA is to consider the large generator application for interconnection of the BREC to the NSTS at the Moenkopi to Cedar Mountain 500-kV transmission line. Reclamation's need for the action is to respond to NextEra Energy Resources, LLC's application for a Large Generator Interconnection Agreement (LGIA), in accordance with applicable laws and regulations described below, and, if appropriate, approve the LGIA.

Reclamation's need is based on the partial ownership of the NSTS by the United States (U.S.) government. The transmission system was authorized by the Colorado River Basin Project Act (PL 90-537, 82 Statute 885), and Reclamation manages the Federal government's interests. Reclamation, along with the other owners of the NSTS, must approve the proposed interconnection to the Moenkopi to Cedar Mountain 500-kV transmission line.

Additional information is provided in the Final EA, which is incorporated by reference.

Public Involvement

Reclamation solicited input from the public on the Proposed Action to assist in identifying key issues and defining the scope of the EA. A public notice soliciting comments was sent to 159 individuals, stakeholders, Tribes, agencies, and organizations; published on the Reclamation and the Forest Service websites; and published in the *Arizona Daily Sun* initiating a 30-day scoping period on June 8, 2022. The scoping period closed on July 7, 2022. In total, 8 comment letters were received during the scoping period. Comments received during scoping included input on information to be

included in the EA (such as required permits or resource analysis issues), requesting clarification on the proposed action, or expressing interest in future notifications.

The Draft EA was published for public review for a 30-day public comment period from September 1 to October 3, 2022. A Notice of Availability was sent to 159 individuals, stakeholders, Tribes, agencies, and organizations. Information was also made available on the Reclamation and the Forest Service project websites. In addition, a legal notice announcing the 30-day comment period was published in the *Arizona Daily Sun*, the newspaper of record. In total, three comments were received during the comment period for the Draft EA. One comment came by telephone from a nearby landowner asking for clarification on the project location. Another comment came from Salt River Project, a co-owner of the NSTS, endorsing the project. The final comment, submitted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, notified Reclamation that the project may require a Department of Army permit if any discharges of dredged or fill materials occur within “waters of the U.S.” (WOTUS). This issue is addressed in Section 3.12, and it was determined that no impacts on WOTUS or potential non-WOTUS features will occur under the Proposed Action. These comments did not result in any changes to the EA.

Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action (Selected Alternative), Reclamation would approve the LGIA for the Project, which includes the construction, operation, maintenance, and eventual decommissioning of Project facilities, for interconnection to the transmission grid at the Cedar Mountain to Moenkopi 500-kV transmission line. At full buildout, the BREC facility would provide up to 160 megawatts of generation output to the transmission line. A detailed description of the Proposed Action is found in the Final EA under Chapter 2.

The best management practices (BMPs) incorporated as part of the Proposed Action are listed in Table 7 of the Final EA. The environmental effects analysis conducted for the Final EA considers environmental effects after these BMPs are implemented. Implementation of BMPs would be required.

Summary of Impacts

Reclamation’s analysis in the Final EA determined that there would be limited impacts resulting from the Proposed Action. The following issues were addressed in the Final EA and have been taken into consideration in Reclamation’s determination of whether a Finding of No Significant Impact is appropriate, or an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) should be prepared.

- 1) Vegetation – The Proposed Action would result in temporary removal of 179.5 acres of pinyon-juniper woodland vegetation during construction, and the permanent removal of 53.91 acres of pinyon-juniper woodland vegetation for the 40-year life of the Project. The vegetation removal is not expected to result in significant impacts. The pinyon-juniper woodland vegetation community is locally and regionally abundant and the amount of pinyon-juniper woodland vegetation that would be temporarily or permanently impacted by

the project is small in comparison. The potential spread noxious weeds and fugitive dust during construction would be reduced with implementation of the BMPs in Table 7 of the Final EA.

- 2) General Wildlife – The Proposed Action would temporarily remove 179.5 acres of habitat, disturb local wildlife during construction activities, and permanently remove 53.91 acres of habitat for the 40-year life of the project. Potential direct adverse impacts to general wildlife individuals from vegetation removal and noise and human presence would be short term, minor, and localized.
- 3) Migratory Birds – The Proposed Action would remove potential habitat as stated above and disturb local migratory birds during construction activities. Large expanses of habitat are available adjacent to the project area and disrupted individuals would be able to shift use to these adjacent areas. Potential adverse, direct impacts to migratory birds would be short term, minor, and localized and would be mitigated with the implementation of BMPs listed in Table 7 of the Final EA. Project construction activities would have no impact or would have a negligible adverse and localized impact on golden eagles through an insignificant reduction of its prey's habitat.
- 4) Special Status Species: Forest Service Sensitive Plant Species and Habitat – The Proposed Action may result in minor impacts to four individual plant species or their habitats during construction activities. Impacts are not likely to result in a trend towards federal listing or loss of population viability.
- 5) Special Status Species: Forest Service Sensitive Wildlife – The Proposed Action would result in minor short-term and long-term, direct adverse effects to Forest Service Sensitive wildlife during construction, operations, maintenance, and decommissioning activities at the Interconnection Project area. Impacts are not likely to result in a trend towards federal listing or loss of population viability.
- 6) Cultural Resources – The Proposed Action would avoid direct and indirect effects on historic properties and would facilitate avoidance by following the strategies outlined in the Final EA Section 3.6.2.1 and BMPs listed in Table 7 of the Final EA.
- 7) Land Use and Grazing – Under the Proposed Action, there would be no change in land ownership, but the land use of 53.91 acres would convert from undeveloped rangeland to utility and access road use. There would be restrictions on grazing in the area during and after construction, and a minor reduction in available forage for the life of the project.
- 8) Noise – The Proposed Action would result in short-term elevations in noise levels during construction activities. Noise levels would return to ambient levels once construction resolves.
- 9) Soils – The Proposed Action would result in increased erosion potential and compaction of 179.5 acres of soils during construction, operations, maintenance, and decommissioning, and would permanently compact 53.91 acres of soil for the 40-year life of the project. BMPs listed in Table 7 of the Final EA are designed to minimize or mitigate direct and indirect effects on soils in the project area would be implemented to reduce impacts to soils.

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- 10) Transportation – The Proposed Action would result in temporary increases of construction traffic along U.S. Route 180 (up to 5.8 percent) and State Route 64 (up to 1.3 percent). Traffic delays would be most noticeable around milepost 255 along U.S. Route 180 and milepost 199 along State Route 64 during the construction period.
 - 11) Aesthetics and Scenery Resources – The Proposed Action would add new visual elements to the existing landscape but expected future developments of the BREC would absorb the interconnection facilities into the landscape character.
 - 12) Water Resources – The Proposed Action would span “waters of the U.S.” (WOTUS) and non-WOTUS features. A Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan would be implemented to minimize impacts to water quality during construction (see BMPs in Table 7 of the Final EA).

The following resource issues were evaluated and determined to either be not affected or minimally affected with implementation of BMPs and were therefore not analyzed in further detail in the EA: air quality, climate change, environmental justice, floodplains and flood zones, Indian Trust Assets, invasive and noxious weeds, paleontology, public health and safety, recreation and access, socioeconomics, threatened and endangered plants and wildlife and habitat, and water quantity and quality. The resources eliminated and the rationale for elimination are presented in Table 3 of the Final EA.

Finding of No Significant Impact

Based upon the analysis presented in the Final EA for the BREC Interconnection Project, Reclamation has determined that the Proposed Action will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not warranted.