

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
SPOKANE DISTRICT, WASHINGTON STATE**

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT TITLE PAGE

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT NO. OR-134-02-EA-003	SERIAL NUMBER WAOR 57174, WAOR 57175	DATE OF REPORT June 14, 2002
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RESOURCE AREA Wenatchee	COUNTY Okanogan
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TYPE OF ACTION Power Transmission Line/Fiber Optic Cable Right-of-Way

APPLICANT'S NAME Public Utility District No. 1 of Okanogan County	ADDRESS (Include zip code) P.O. Box 912 Okanogan, Washington 98840
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DATE(S) OF FIELD EXAMINATION April 11 & 12, 2002

LANDS INVOLVED

Township	Range	Meridian	Section	Subdivision	Acres
33 N.	25 E.	Willamette	27	Portions of the S ¹ / ₂ NE ¹ / ₄ , SW ¹ / ₄ NW ¹ / ₄ and NW ¹ / ₄ SW ¹ / ₄ *acreage for 100' wide R/W x 3,530'	8.1*

PURPOSE OF REPORT:

To determine feasibility and assess the environmental effects of granting a right-of-way to the PUD No. 1 of Okanogan County for an existing power transmission line, and for installation of a new fiber optic cable (on the existing transmission line).

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background Information and Need for the Proposed Action

This report addresses the Public Utility District (PUD) No. 1 of Okanogan County's application to obtain a right-of-way for an existing 115 kV electric power transmission line, an short existing tap line, and a new fiber optic cable (also known as the "Loup Loup Fiber Optic Project"). All of these improvements are associated with the said 115kV transmission line, which crosses two parts of one contiguous tract of public land in the northeastern edge of Tarheel Flat, Okanogan County, Washington. Vicinity and topographic maps of the transmission line route are included in the appendix to this report.

The existing 115kV line was built in 1948, and travels from the city of Okanogan to the PUD's Twisp substation. It provides electric power for the mid and upper reaches of the Methow valley, including the towns of Carleton, Twisp and Winthrop. This transmission line is the only source of power for these areas. The PUD desires to string the fiber optic cable on the existing poles in order to provide a convenient communication link. The cable will be strung along approximately 26.5 miles of the transmission line, terminating at the Century Tel office in Twisp. The PUD would use the cable for its own communication purposes, and sell excess capacity to commercial users. Because of the cost of installation, the PUD is looking to secure use by a commercial entity before going ahead with the project.

B. Conformance With Land Use Plan

The proposed action is in conformance with the right-of-way granting policy in the Spokane Resource Management Plan, as amended (December 1992). See pages 8 and 23 in the August 1985 RMP document.

C. Relationship to Existing Statutes, Regulations, or Other Plans

The granting of rights-of-way for the transmission line and fiber optic cable is authorized by Title V of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (43 USC 1761). The proposed project is in conformance with Okanogan County zoning regulations.

II. PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. Proposed Action

The proposed action is to grant two separate rights-of-way (R/W) to the PUD No. 1 of Okanogan County. Right-of-way WAOR 57174 would authorize the operation and maintenance of the existing 115 kV electric power transmission line, including a short 115 kV tap line (the Malott Tap), across a portion of the S $\frac{1}{2}$ NE $\frac{1}{4}$, SW $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$ and NW $\frac{1}{4}$

SW¼ of Section 26, T.33N., R.25E., Willamette Meridian. The second right-of-way, WAOR 57175, would authorize the installation and maintenance of a fiber optic cable on the existing pole structures used for the 115kV transmission line (same legal description as above).

Both right-of-way grants would be issued for 20 year terms with the right of renewal. The transmission line right-of-way would be 100 feet wide and approximately 3,530 feet long (including the 100 foot long tap line), for a total use of about 8.1 acres of public land. The right-of-way for the fiber optic cable would also be about 100 feet in width, and mostly *overlap* the transmission line R/W. Its total length would be about 3,430 feet and constitute 7.87 acres.

Because the 115kV line has been in service and maintained since 1948, no new construction or re-construction is planned. Placement of the fiber optic cable would also not involve disturbance on the public lands. Elsewhere on the route, the PUD would install a number of new intermediate poles, because the span of the existing towers will not adequately support the fiber optic cable. Access to the existing powerline would be by paved road (State Route 20), dirt trail, and overland. However, no travel across the public land is planned. No road construction nor temporary work areas have been requested on the public land.

Project Design Features:

If cultural or paleontological resources are discovered in the project area during cable installation activities, changes in configuration may be needed to avoid the resource. If cultural sites cannot be avoided, consultation with the Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, the Okanogan County Historical Society, as appropriate, and in some cases the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation would precede project implementation.

A set of standard stipulations is included in BLM right-of-way grants for electric transmission lines and fiber optic cables. Included are stipulations to ensure that the PUD's existing powerline has a design that minimizes risks of raptor electrocution, uses maintenance methods that minimize soil and vegetation disturbance, rehabilitates and reseeds the site if needed, and controls any increase in noxious weeds. For example, specific stipulations would be included directing the PUD to control weed infestations on the public land (directly or indirectly caused by its activities) and ensure that all vehicles accessing the public land are free of weed seed.

A stipulation would be needed to limit construction to the time period between May 1st and October 31st. Construction could not be allowed from November 1st to April 30th unless appropriate field inventory and/or consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is conducted, as discussed in the environmental impacts section.

B. Alternatives

The alternative to the proposed action is No Action, which is to deny authorization of the existing transmission line and emplacement of the new fiber optic cable.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

A. Physical Environment

General Setting: The existing transmission line is located on uplands above the northeastern edge of Tarheel Flat, about four miles southwest of Okanogan, Washington. Tarheel Flat itself is a nearly level terrace that is mostly covered by fruit orchard. On the public land portion of the route, the transmission line travels across a steeply sloping south facing hillside with areas of rock outcrop.

Vegetation: Vegetation on the hillside is typical shrub-steppe, with heavy amounts of bitterbrush and needlegrass (*Stipa*). Other species include big sagebrush and stiff sage, and a few scattered ponderosa pines. The public land has not been inventoried for sensitive plants. The potential for sensitive species to be located here is low.

Wildlife: This area provides habitat for shrub-steppe species and is important winter range for migratory mule deer. Deer carcasses and upland birds attract bald eagles in the winter, particularly in late February and March when potential prey animals are most stressed by the hardships of winter.

Cultural Resources: A cultural resource file search, literature review and field inventory of the powerline route across public lands were completed by a BLM archaeologist. No sites were identified within the project area on public lands.

By letter dated April 8, 2002, consultation was initiated with the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation to determine if sacred areas, traditional cultural properties, or tribal interests would be affected by the proposed project. No concerns were identified. Letters were also sent to the Okanogan County Historical Society and the Washington State Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation on the same date.

Visual Resources: At its closest point, the existing transmission line comes within about ¼ mile of the north side of State Route 20, the highway traveling from Okanogan to Twisp. This highway sees light to moderate use by county residents, along with some recreational traffic. This area is largely natural in appearance except for the orchard developments on Tarheel Flat. Man-made features visible from the highway included orchards, residential dwellings, fences, and the existing 115kV transmission line (wood H and triple pole design). Little screening exists, so most of these features are visible by

passing motorists. Because it does not occupy a ridgetop position and uses wood poles, the existing transmission line is not highly visible.

B. Land Status

The Master Title Plats indicate the surface and mineral estate of the above described public lands are owned by the United States. There are no mining claims of record, the land is not leased for grazing, and there are no other encumbrances known to affect the subject property.

Primary Use of Subject Public Land: This tract is primarily used for open space and wildlife habitat. There does not appear to be any legal public access to this block of public land.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

A. Proposed Action

Approval of the proposed action would mean the continued use and maintenance of a 115kV powerline, and the installation of a fiber optic cable on the existing poles. The effects from this action should be minimal, as the PUD has not expressed a need to operate surface disturbing equipment on the public land. Because the powerline has been in place for over 50 years, there would be no new visual impacts.

Although no staging on the public land would be authorized, incidental surface disturbance is still a possibility. In the long term, some surface disturbance on the public land due to maintenance activities is inevitable. This disturbance would be minor in extent and temporary. Vegetation at the site could also experience slight impacts because of maintenance activities, and by infestations of noxious weeds brought in by maintenance equipment.

Although installation of the fiber optic cable and future maintenance activities could displace or disturb resident wildlife, they should experience only short term effects. The existing transmission poles and lines likely provide perches for kestrels, red-tailed hawks, golden eagles, ravens, and other raptors, which could possibly enhance hunting opportunities in this vicinity.

If project work takes place from December through March it would affect wintering deer and possibly bald eagles. That is, noise associated with the activities and human presence could cause deer and bald eagles to be displaced to adjacent areas for the duration of the activities. Potential adverse effects on the bald eagle, a federally listed species, would trigger consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Consultation would have to take place prior to the start of the project. April and November are transitional times when animals may be present. Surveys could determine wildlife use, and if they are not

present, work could proceed with little effect to wildlife. Work from May through October would have no effect on eagles and little effect on mule deer. Activities from April through July would have some effect on nesting migratory birds, possibly disturbing breeding or nesting adults and crushing nests.

The existing transmission line on the BLM property causes a minor degree of visual degradation. Because of the wood pole construction, moderate height and sidehill location, the facility is not obtrusive.

The following critical elements, not discussed above, have been analyzed and would not be affected by this action: Air and water quality, areas of critical environmental concern, farmlands, floodplains, environmental justice, wastes (hazardous or solid), wetlands/riparian zones, wild and scenic rivers, wilderness values, and water quality (ground and surface).

B. Alternatives

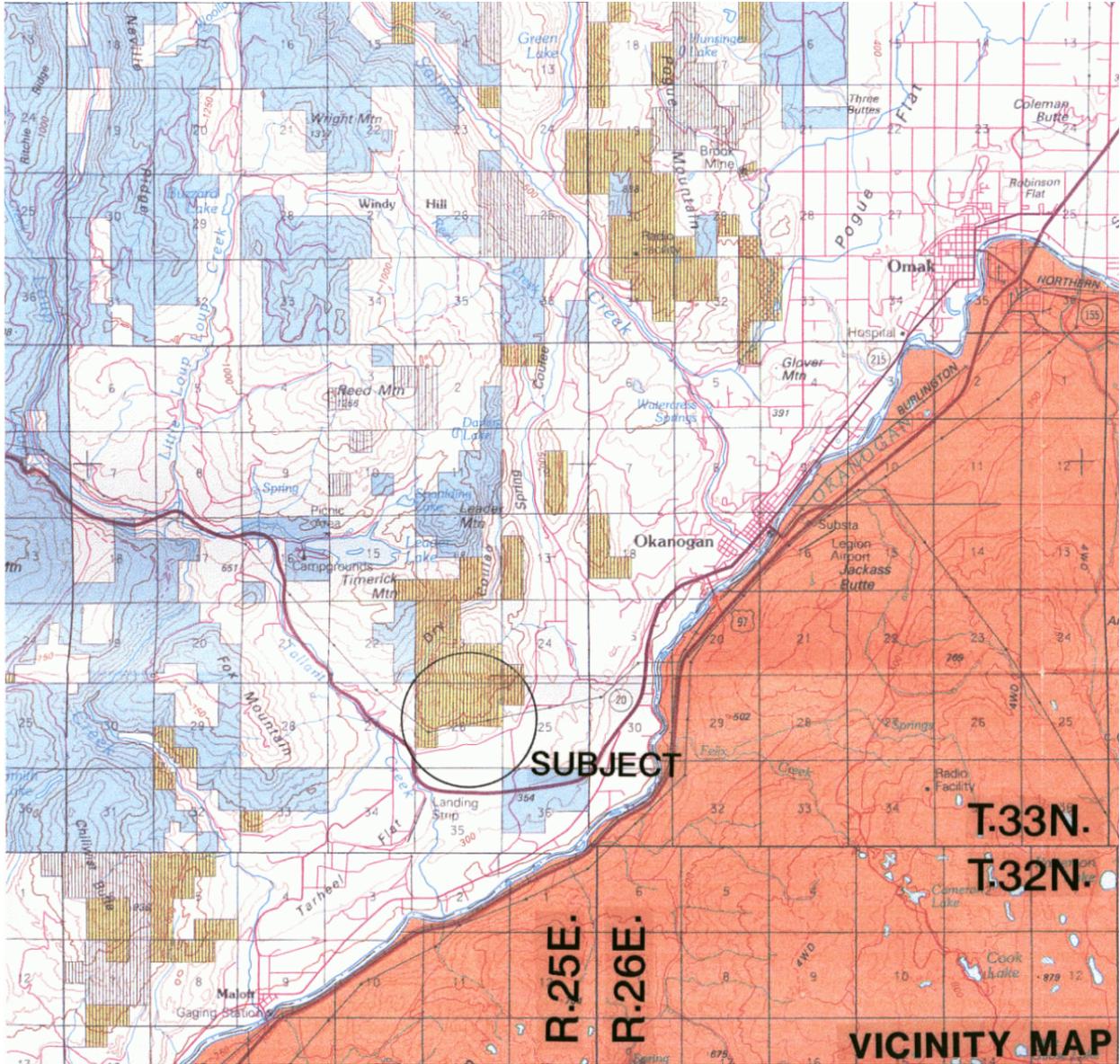
If the No Action Alternative is selected, there would no immediate impacts to the subject public land, since the existing situation would continue. If the PUD were required to ultimately move its transmission line off the BLM, impacts would occur due to removal of the powerline and reconstruction elsewhere. However, unless the existing transmission line is shown to be causing problems, it would be difficult for BLM to justify its removal.

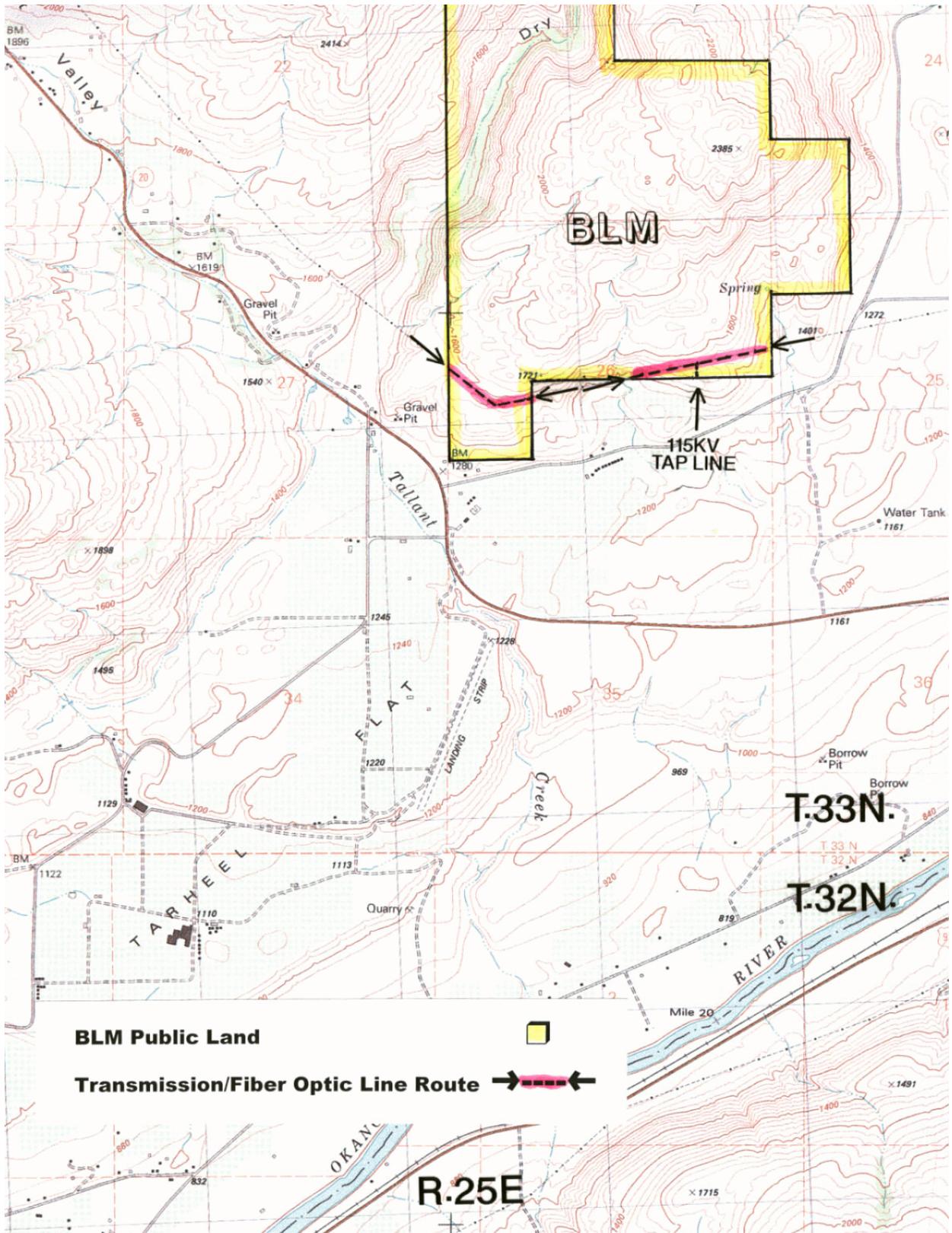
V. LIST OF PREPARERS AND STAFF MEMBERS CONSULTED

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APPENDIX

1 Vicinity Map
2 Topographic Map





TOPOGRAPHIC MAP

