

Environmental Assessment

Environmental Assessment (EA) Number: OR-056-01-073

Title: Wasco Electric Cooperative

Serial Number: OR 56718

Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Office: Prineville, Oregon

Resource Area: Deschutes

I. PURPOSE AND NEED

Wasco Electric Cooperative is proposing to install an overhead single phase power line (220 Amps with 7,200 volts) to operate a railroad signal for the Burlington Northern/Sante Fe Railroad. Currently there is limited power running parallel along the railroad tracks and the Deschutes River. However, since this wattage is reduced over distance there is not enough power at this site to notify the railroad if there is a blockage on the tracks. Because of the reduced power wattage there is potential for train derailment. The installation would require a right-of-way grant from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The electrification of the track signal is necessary for the safety of the trains, crews, lading, and the protection of public crossing along this line segment. The BLM also has an administrative site along the route which could potentially hook up to electricity. Due to the location of existing power sources and the lack of access to the site no other viable alternatives are available.

II. CONFORMANCE WITH LAND USE PLANS

In the Proposed Two Rivers Resource Management Plan (RMP), dated September 1985, on page 27, it states, "Public lands will continue to be made available for local rights-of-way, including multiple use and single use utility/transportation corridors following existing routes, communication sites, and roads."

In the Final Lower Deschutes Plan, approved January 1993, on page 83, it states, "BLM lands will continue to be available for local rights-of-way, including multiple use and single use utility/transportation corridors following existing routes, communication sites and roads."

III. PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

No-Action

Construction of an electrical line would be denied across BLM managed public land. Everything else would remain as is. Currently there is limited power running parallel along the railroad tracks for the Burlington Northern/Sante Fe Railroad's use. However, the limited power is not enough to notify the railroad if there is a blockage on the railroad tracks. There is no power running to the BLM facility.

Proposed Action

Wasco Electric Cooperative is proposing to install an overhead single phase power line (220 Amps with 7,200 volts) to operate a railroad signal for the Burlington Northern/Sante Fe Railroad. The power line would run in an easterly direction following a county road known as "Public Usage Road 3137." Along the steep portion above the Deschutes River, small cuts would be made into the uphill side of the road cut for pole placement. This project would involve private and public lands and would require approximately 100 poles to be placed approximately 250 feet apart. Easements for the power line crossing private land would be secured prior to the implementation of the right-of-way grant.

The power line route on BLM managed public lands are described as,

T. 2 S., R. 15 E., Willamette Meridian, Oregon.

Section 22, SE $\frac{1}{4}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$,
Section 23, S $\frac{1}{2}$ SW $\frac{1}{4}$,
Section 27, N $\frac{1}{2}$, &
Section 28, N $\frac{1}{2}$,

The power poles would be set as near as possible to the existing road to facilitate access. The power poles would range in height from 35 to 40 feet and they would be sunk into the ground 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 6 feet respectively. The anchors would be in the ground approximately 20-35 feet from the pole and a guy wire would be installed from the anchor to the top of the pole.

The excavation of rock would be necessary in much of the area in order to sink the poles to the required depth. Drilling with rock teeth and an auger for pole locations would be needed. There is a possibility that blasting would also be needed. If blasting is needed it would be confined to the area of the pole. To do this a blasting mat would be used to cover the area to be blasted. To blast the area the contractors could use a powder and a liquid to enable the explosion. However, the

area of explosion would be confined to the matted area.

There was a lightning caused wildfire in the Ferry Canyon area on July 12, 2001. The wildfire burned approximately 9,250 acres on the west side of the Deschutes River. The entire proposed project area on BLM managed public lands burned. Depending on the time of implementation, further danger of fire from blasting would be minimal.

Alternative A

Wasco Electric and Burlington Northern/Sante Fe Railroad also considered locating the power line and poles on the east side of the Deschutes River and then crossing the river. However, since the Deschutes River is a Wild and Scenic River crossing the river with new utility lines is not allowed. This alternative was considered and then dismissed. This alternative will not be analyzed further in this document.

IV. DESCRIPTION OF THE EXISTING ENVIRONMENT

The project site encompasses the top of a gentle to moderately east sloping ridge for about one mile, with the rest of the site mostly on steep north and east exposures above the Deschutes River. The very eastern portion of the site is relatively flat and adjacent to/within Ferry Canyon near its confluence with the Deschutes River. The elevation ranges from 500 to 2600 feet.

Currently there is limited power running parallel along the railroad tracks and the Deschutes River. At Maupin the power wattage is 440 and by the time the power gets to Ferry Canyon the wattage is down to 30. This is not enough wattage to signal the railroad if there is a blockage on the tracks. Because of the reduced power wattage there is potential for train derailment.

Soil/Vegetation

The western portion of the route, on the ridge, is scabland or biscuit-scabland, and as such has rocky, shallow clay soils. Soils are deeper on the steeper slopes but still have a large component of rock.

Typical biscuit-scabland vegetation type dominates the ridgetop including such species as stiff sagebrush and Sandberg bluegrass with heavy concentrations of cheatgrass. This area has been disturbed through historic grazing. In a more undisturbed state, vegetation expected on the site would be dominated by bluebunch wheatgrass with lesser amounts of Thurber needle grass, Idaho fescue, and Sandberg blue grass on deeper soiled areas. Other species include buckwheat, common yarrow, and bottlebrush squirreltail. The steep

hillsides are in better condition being dominated by Idaho fescue-bluebunch wheatgrass with an overstory of big sagebrush. Vegetative condition changes closer to the river, as evidenced by increasing densities of cheatgrass and other annuals. The bottom of Ferry Canyon is quite weedy with evidence of historic livestock grazing, flood events, and fire. The mouth of the canyon is dominated by the common mullein.

Fisheries

See the attached exhibit entitled “Biological Evaluation.”

Riparian/Wetlands

One power pole would be placed within the riparian area of Ferry Canyon, a perennial stream. While the project area would not be located in the active floodplain, pole locations 93 and 94 are located on rubble and cobble deposited in the past as debris flow material. (Maps with these pole locations are available for review at the Prineville District, BLM office.) Due to the extremely flashy nature of streamflows within the canyon and the resultant debris flows, the active channel has shifted and changed locations several times in the recent past.

Threatened and Endangered Plants and Animals

Plants

The project area was inventoried on March 21 and May 15, 2001 for special status plants. See that attached exhibit entitled “Biological Evaluation.” No federally-listed plants are known or suspected from this area. However, one plant, *Lomatium farinosum* var. *hamvleniae* (Hamvlen’s lomatium) was found in rocky soils along the western portion of the proposed route. This plant is considered to be “threatened or endangered in Oregon but more common elsewhere” and therefore is an “assessment species.” In the Prineville District, Hamvlen’s lomatium has been found extensively in the Criterion area, southwest of the project area near Maupin, in rocky swales, and is suspected in similar habitat in the Lower Deschutes portion of the district. It appears to tolerate some level of disturbance as it is observed to persist in areas subject to intensive trampling by livestock. Another species, *Astragalus tyghensis* (Tygh Valley Mildvetch) was suspected but not found along the project route.

Fisheries

Summer steelhead, *Onchoryachus mykiss* occupy the Deschutes River and at times Ferry Canyon. These fish are listed as Threatened by the National Marine Fisheries Service. The proposed project was evaluated to be a “No Effect” (see attached biological evaluation).

Cultural Resources

Due to the nature of the land form, its proximity to the Deschutes River, and available resources found there, both prehistoric and historic groups of people have visited and utilized the project area in the past. That visitation and land use is manifested in the form of prehistoric lithic scatters and temporary camp sites, historic structures, remnants of homestead farm machinery, and a historical landscape associated with agriculture and animal husbandry.

The bottom of Ferry Canyon, on the east side of the proposed project, is the site of the Ferry Canyon House. The site has high historic value due to the presence of the original farm house and a large number of associated structures and farm implements. Few such sites exist on public land in that environmental setting. The National Register eligibility determination for the site has currently been deferred until historic context statements can be produced. However, the site is potentially eligible to the National Register of Historic Places because of its overall integrity, its variety of structures and associated equipment, and its largely unaltered setting.

Wildlife

There are no known threatened, endangered or proposed specie sites (nesting, roosting or special habitats) located in or immediately adjacent to the proposed project area. However, bald eagles occasionally forage in this area and tend to use the area close to the river.

The proposed project area is located within one golden eagle nesting territory and the proposed utility route is located between one quarter and one half mile of three nest sites. Additionally, the proposed utility route is located within a couple hundred feet of two owl nest sites.

The area for this proposed project is located within deer winter range.

Livestock Grazing

The BLM managed public land has a grazing lease for 225 Animal Unit Months within the Ferry Canyon Allotment #7547. Grazing is authorized in the riparian

pasture within Ferry Canyon between November 1st and April 30th as directed in the Lower Deschutes Resource Management Plan (LDRMP). Upland pastures encompassing the project area are grazed after May 1st, in the late spring and summer, in conjunction with private lands.

Visual

The Two Rivers RMP has only a limited description of the visual quality of this area. The scenic values of the river corridor are described in the 1993 Lower Deschutes River Management Plan (LDRMP) as follows:

“The project area has a road and railroad paralleling the river on each side. There are existing power lines in the area, including the large Bonneville Power lines on the canyon rim across the river from the proposed project. Based on this condition, it would be classified under Visual Management Class 3.”

V. IMPACTS

Soil and Vegetation

No-Action

Changes in the soil and vegetation may occur as a result of a lightning caused wildfire in that area that occurred on July 12, 2001.

Proposed Action

The drilling or blasting of the pole holes would impact the soil and burned vegetation, although, the drilling and blasting would be confined to a small area. Approximately 3-5 trees would be flagged for removal.

Riparian/Wetlands

No-Action

The recent wildfire burned the riparian vegetation, including alder. It is anticipated that the alder will resprout to become a vigorous stand of trees once again lining the channel. An evaluation of the effects of the fire will occur after the next growing season.

Proposed Action

Only one pole, pole P94, would be located in the valley bottom. While it would not be located in the active floodplain, it is located on rubble and cobble deposited in the past as debris flow material.

Due to the extremely flashy nature of stream flows within the canyon and the resultant debris flows, the active channel has shifted and changed locations several times in the recent past. The current active channel is located approximately 30 feet from the proposed location of pole number 94. The site of the current proposed location of pole 94 is presently stable. However, there is a risk that a debris flow could inundate the site with cobble, rubble and gravel. This risk is escalated by the fact that the whole watershed burned, including the riparian area on July 12, 2001. If the alder and other riparian vegetation does not recover quickly, bank stability may be entirely lost, resulting in the whole valley bottom of cobble and rubble becoming very unstable.

A second pole is proposed to be placed between the shed and the house to provide potential electricity to the administrative site. This pole placement is similar to the placement of pole 94 (on old debris flow material), but is located approximately 20 feet from the current active channel. This site also runs the risk of being enveloped with cobble and rubble should a debris flow initiate within the canyon.

Threatened and Endangered Plants and Animals

No-Action

There would be no effect to threatened and endangered or special status plants.

Proposed Action

It is likely that some Hamblen's lomatium plants would be displaced through installation of poles and support wires along the rocky ridge in the west. Recognizing that the density of this plant varies from one location to another, it is likely that 10 plants, on average, could be impacted at each pole location. Approximately 15 poles would be located in habitat suitable for this plant, resulting in a potential loss of 150 plants. Considering the available habitat on the top of this ridge (approximately 20 acres with potentially several thousand plants) it is unlikely this population of Hamblen's lomatium would be impacted to any degree through implementation of this project.

Cultural Resources

No-Action

Cultural Resources are protected under law; however, there would still be potential for vandalism of these resources.

Proposed Action

Soils would be disturbed during the installation of power poles. That disturbance could lead to the displacement of subsurface cultural materials. Additionally, the placement of power poles would have an effect on the visual appearance of the historic Ferry Canyon house.

Wildlife

No-Action

There would be no affect to wildlife.

Proposed Action

Wildlife would be displaced during the construction of the powerline and would be able to return once the construction was completed.

The proposed action would have no affect to threatened, endangered or proposed species.

The proposed action would cause a temporary short term disturbance to wildlife (such as wintering deer) in the immediate area causing them to move to another area.

If the proposed action includes blasting and occurs during the breeding season, then it could cause golden eagles and owls to abandon their nest sites and not reproduce that year. However, if the proposed action occurs outside of the breeding season then there would be minor disturbances to eagles and owls. Breeding season for golden eagles starts in early January and runs through August. Most owls breed within this time frame as well.

Raptors, such as golden eagles, are attracted to power line poles to use as perches and nesting platforms. Raptors can be electrocuted when using power poles and golden eagles are particularly vulnerable to electrocution. However, there are ways to safe guard power lines and poles to make them more safe for raptor use, including golden eagles.

Livestock Grazing

No-Action

Livestock grazing would continue as it currently is stipulated in the RMP.

Proposed Action

Grazing may experience some impacts due to increased traffic during power line construction and periodic maintenance. Those impacts would primarily occur through gates being left open or damage to fences.

Visual

No-Action

There would be no impact on visual values.

Proposed Action

The proposed utility line would have minimal impact on the visual quality of this section of the Deschutes River. The proposed line would not be visible from the Deschutes River except in Section 27 as the line extends from the top of the butte down the road for approximately ½ mile. Based on this minimal impact, the existing scenic quality (Management Class 3) would not be affected. This is consistent with the Two Rivers Resource Management Plan and carries forward the intent of the visual criteria in the RMP and LDRMP.

Invasive & Nonnative Plants

No-Action

The area would remain primarily the same but invasive and non native plants could be introduced through other means, such as vehicle traffic.

Proposed Action

Construction activities for the electrical line on public lands have the potential to spread existing populations or introduce new populations of noxious weeds to public lands. Exotic weeds could be introduced into the area during construction.

Cumulative

If this proposal is approved, there would be an increase number of power poles and lines in the Ferry Canyon area near the Lower Deschutes River. This proposal is for a single phase power line and with no new neighbors anticipated in the foreseeable future, this power line would not be increased to a multi phase power line.

VII. MITIGATION MEASURES

- A. Wasco Electric would work with BLM noxious weed control officers to ensure control of any weed populations in a timely fashion.
- B. If easements are not obtained from private property owners, and if the right-of-way had been authorized, the right-of-way grant would then be terminated.
- C. Wasco Electric would work with BLM staff and the current Ferry Canyon administrative site caretakers to ensure that placement of power poles are obscured from view as much as possible to lessen their visual impact to that historic structure.
- D. Power lines and associated poles would be constructed following the recommendations contained in the "Suggested Practices for Raptor Protection on Power Lines: The State of the Art in 1996."
- E. If approved, the right-of-way holder would construct two perches on top of two power poles that extend above the power lines (follow practices in "Suggested practices for Raptor Protection on Power lines: The State of the Art in 1996). These two perches are to be located at prominent points on BLM administered lands and would be determined by a site visit between BLM wildlife biologist and a designated person from Wasco Electric.
- F. If approved, the right-of-way holder would install one osprey nesting platform (BLM could provide the pole, but cannot transport it to the site). This nesting platform should be located relatively close to the river, but the location would be determined by a site visit between the BLM wildlife biologist and a designated person from Wasco Electric.
- G. No construction would occur between the months of January 1, 2001 through August 15, 2001 unless prior approval is granted by the Wildlife Biologist.
- H. If approved, the holder of the right-of-way grant must contact the BLM prior to any construction activities.

VI. NO IMPACT ITEMS

The following critical elements were considered, but will not be addressed because they would either not be affected or do not exist in the project area:

1. Areas of Critical Environmental Concern
2. Air Quality

3. Drinking Water Quality
4. Environmental Justice
5. Floodplains
6. Hazardous Wastes
7. Native American Religious concerns
8. Paleontological Resources
9. Prime or Unique Agricultural Lands
10. Wild and Scenic Rivers
11. Wilderness
12. Timber
13. Recreation

VII. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

Persons and Agencies Consulted (this shows who we contacted during scoping)

Richard E. Dickson, Burlington Northern/Sante Fe Railroad
John Burgess, Wasco Electric Cooperative
Jan Houck, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department

Preparers (BLM)

Gail Smith, Botanist
Janet Hutchison, Realty Specialist
JC Hanf, Supervisory
Ron Halvorson, Botanist
JoAnne Armson, Botanist
Jim Eisner, Fisheries Biologist
Michelle McSwain, Hydrologist
Ron Gregory, Archaeologist
Tom Mottl, Recreation Planner
Bill Dean, Wildlife Biologist
Helen McGranahan, Range Technician
Eric Stone, State Office Planner

NEPA requirements met:

Marci Todd

Date