

BLM okays soil surveys along Gateway Transmission route

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A Bureau of Land Management environmental assessment report released June 18 determined that Rocky Mountain Power and Idaho Power's request to conduct soil surveys along the routes proposed for their 1,149-mile-long Gateway West Transmission Line will not have a significant effect upon BLM administered lands in Wyoming and Idaho.

RMP and Idaho Power hope to drill 914 boreholes measuring six to eight inches in diameter and up to 40 feet deep along both the proposed route for the Gateway West line and 873 miles of alternate routes. Engineers will then use soil samples from the holes to help determine the best route for the proposed transmission line, according to RMP spokeswoman Margaret Oler.

"This is just part of the data collection that they need to do," Walt George, BLM project manager for Gateway West, explained the Bureau's rationale for conducting the Environmental Assessment. "It just happens that this is a little more mechanical or surface disturbing than going out or looking for Indian artifacts or surveying wildlife."

Four legged lattice towers will provide the primary support for the transmission line and the geotechnical data from these soil samples will help determine the appropriate depth requirements for the towers' foundations, according to the environmental assessment. The companies plan to drill 278 of their holes on lands administered by the BLM and the remaining 636 on private land, state land and Indian Reservation.

RMP wants to drill 180 holes along the 1W and 1E segments of the proposed Gateway West route. These segments will connect RMP's Windstar Substation (near the Dave Johnston Power Plant) with the company's Aeolus substation outside of Medicine Bow. The 1E route has caused significant amounts of controversy amongst landowners in Converse County who cite concerns about the transmission lines construction ranging from aesthetic degradation of the area to wildlife issues to health effects.

RMP insists that the Gateway West Project is necessary to meet its increasing transmission needs and that construction of two separate transmission routes between Windstar and Aeolus will provide both a backup should one line be damaged and transmission capacity for possible future power generation projects in the area.

RMP and Idaho Power requested a short term right-of-way from the BLM to conduct their soil survey on BLM-administered land. The BLM lacks the authority to grant the utility companies permission to conduct surveys on private land and RMP is currently attempting to obtain permission from landowners to conduct surveys on private lands along the proposed transmission line route.

The environmental assessment took into account issues like the survey's effect upon cultural resources, fish and wildlife, sensitive plant and animal species, biological soil crust, vegetation, environmental justice, land uses and paleontological resources. Among other findings, the assessment concluded that most wildlife species would not be affected by the survey due to its "short term nature...and minimal disturbance," there would be no negative direct effects upon vegetation; and insignificant "contribution to a regional destruction of sensitive fossil remains."

Despite the reports findings, the proposed surveys have irked some local landowners.

"[The proposal] is premature, to say the least," Northern Laramie Range Alliance representative Kenneth Lay said in a written statement. The Northern Laramie Range Alliance (a concerned citizen group recently formed to fight development in the Northern Laramie Range) has vocally opposed the 1E segment of Gateway West.

"The numerous objections to (segment 1E), and the more than 400 citizen petitions the (Northern Laramie Range) Alliance has gathered opposing it, remain unaddressed. Many landowners have declined permission for Rocky Mountain Power to enter their property, so any data would be incomplete in any event. Under these circumstances, there is a very high probability that the money spent on this exercise will be wasted," Lay said.

The BLM stresses that the report's findings do not constitute approval for any route proposed for the Gateway West Transmission Line, its construction, or its operation, and the Bureau is providing a 30-day public comment period prior to finalizing its "finding of no significant impact." Those wishing to comment can do so online at http://www.wy.blm.gov/nepa/cfodocs/gateway_west/comments.php or by contacting the BLM's Casper field office at (307) 261-7600.

