



United States Department of the Interior



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
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Unicom Incorporated, TERRA Northwest Phase III to Kotzebue Broadband Telecommunications Project

Five Microwave Repeater Tower Sites

Environmental Assessment, DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2012-0036-EA

Case Files AA-93345, AA-93345-A through AA-93345-F

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Background

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) (DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2012-0036-EA) to analyze the effects of five remote repeater sites operated by Unicom Incorporated, a subsidiary of GCI, on lands managed by the Anchorage Field Office (AFO) and the Central Yukon Field Office (CYFO) in the Nulato Hills and on the Seward and Baldwin Peninsulas, Alaska. (A sixth tower is also proposed on private land.) The six repeaters are part of a larger project to bring broadband internet to northwest Alaska and the Norton Sound and Kotzebue Sound communities. The EA considered a no action alternative, the proposed action (five repeater sites to be authorized on BLM-managed lands), and a third alternative, which would locate six repeaters located on BLM-managed lands.

Under the Proposed Action alternative, four of the repeater towers would be constructed on mountaintops. For these sites, construction could be completed with helicopter-support only. However, the Baldwin Peninsula repeater is sited on a low-lying peninsula and requires a higher tower and, subsequently, additional foundation work compared to the mountaintop sites. Therefore, in addition to some helicopter-supported construction, the Baldwin Peninsula site would also require an overland move of heavy equipment, including equipment drop-off via a barge landing and overland transport via an “ice road.”

National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), Section 106, compliance is not yet complete for the requested barge landing site, overland move route, or for the sixth tower site on private land (described in the Environmental Assessment as the “KIC Site”), which is a connected action. Therefore, these ancillary features cannot be authorized by the BLM at this time.

The following assessment of significance pertains only to the five tower sites on BLM-managed lands and does not include the barge landing site nor overland move route. A separate review and determination of impact significance will be issued when the NHPA Section 106 process is completed.

Finding of No Significant Impact

This action and its effects have been evaluated consistent with the Council on Environmental Quality regulations for determining *significance*. Per 40 CFR § 1508.27, a determination of *significance* requires consideration of both context and intensity. The former refers to the relative context in which the action would occur such as society as a whole, affected region, affected interests, etc. The latter refers to the severity of the impact.

Context

This means that the significance of an action must be analyzed in several contexts such as society as a whole (human, national), the affected region, the affected interests, and the locality. Significance varies with the setting of the proposed action. For instance, in the case of a site-specific action, significance would usually depend upon the effects in the locale rather than in the world as a whole. Both short- and long-term effects are relevant. The disclosure of effects in this EA found the actions to be limited in context.

The Proposed Action and alternatives would occur in remote locations in western Alaska. The five repeaters in the proposed action are all several miles from any established community:

- The Ungalik Repeater is located 28 miles northeast of Shaktoolik, a small community of 258 people (96% Alaska Native).
- The Dime Repeater is located 17 miles northeast of Koyuk, a small community of 347 people (89% Alaska Native).
- The Talik Repeater is located 44 miles Northeast of Koyuk, a small community of 347 people (89% Alaska Native).
- The Harvey Repeater is located 20 miles northeast of Buckland, a small community of 437 people (95% Alaska Native).
- The Baldwin Peninsula repeater is located 33 miles southeast of Kotzebue, the hub of the Northwest Arctic Borough, with a population of 3,224 (74% Alaska Native) (EA, p. 3-25).

The first four towers listed are located on remote mountaintops. Only the Ungalik Repeater is close to the Iditarod National Historic Trail (within approximately two miles). The Baldwin Peninsula tower is located on a low-lying peninsula on the north side of the Seward Peninsula within Kotzebue Sound. A sixth tower, on privately-owned lands, is close to Kotzebue, a large rural hub community.

Because the tower footprints are limited in size (less than one acre each), the proposed construction activities are limited in duration, and the effects are local in nature, this project's effects are not likely to significantly affect regional or national resources.

Intensity

I have considered the potential intensity/severity of the impacts anticipated from proposed communication towers, associated tower site facilities and the plan of development relative to each of the ten factors suggested for consideration by the Council on Environmental Quality:

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.

The EA considered both potential beneficial and adverse effects (for example, see EA p. 4-32 for potential positive sociocultural impacts from increased broadband service). None of the effects identified in the EA are beyond the range of effects analyzed in the Kobuk-Seward Resource Management Plan (RMP) Record of Decision (2008), or the Iditarod National Historic Trail Comprehensive Management Plan (CMP) (1986).

2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health and safety.

No aspect of the Proposed Action or alternatives would have an effect on public health and safety. Project design features, special permit stipulations, and the approved plan of development will require operating procedures to minimize public health and safety concerns.

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity of historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

The Proposed Action has one repeater (Ungalik Repeater) located approximately two miles from the Iditarod National Historic Trail. The degree to which the action may adversely affect this historic and/or cultural resource or may cause loss or destruction of the significant scientific, cultural, or historic resource is discussed below under #8.

The design features identified in the EA and in the plan of development would minimize effects to visual resources (EA, p. 4-55-57). Project design features and permit stipulations specific to cultural resources specify how the operation will minimize impacts to and/or protect these resources.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

The effects of the Proposed Action and alternatives are similar to many other communication operations in remote geographic settings. No unique or appreciable scientific controversy has been identified regarding the effects of the Proposed Action or alternatives.

- 5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

Similar to Item 4 above, the effects of the Proposed Action and alternatives are similar to many other communication operations in remote geographic settings. The analysis has not shown that there would be any unique or unknown risks to the human environment.

- 6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

Similar actions have been reviewed and approved in Alaska as well as on a national scale. This project neither establishes a precedent nor represents a decision in principle about future actions. The Proposed Action and alternatives are consistent with actions appropriate for the installation of communication sites through Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) leases as outlined in the Kobuk-Seward RMP.

- 7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.*

Cumulative effects are addressed for each of the resources. The environmental analysis did not reveal any significant cumulative effects nor individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.

- 8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources.*

There are no features within the communication site lease areas that are listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The BLM received State Historic Preservation Office concurrence of “no adverse effect” for the Ungalik Repeater site and concurrence of “no historic properties affected” for the Dime, Talik, Harvey, and Baldwin Repeater sites, by letter on May 29, 2013. The NHPA Section 106 process is not yet complete for the Baldwin barge landing, overland move route, nor for the connected action of the “KIC Site” on private land. The process must be completed before the Baldwin barge landing and overland route is authorized.

- 9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.*

Several federally threatened or candidate bird species have the potential to occur at the tower sites and/or at staging areas (EA, p. 4-25). However, the adverse impacts to these species would be minimized through project design features and stipulations (EA, p. 2-23-2-24). The towers are self-supporting structures without guide wires; this will minimize the potential for bird strikes. The two towers that will be 250 feet high (one on federal lands at the Baldwin Peninsula and one on private lands) will have flashing lights (if approved by FAA). Furthermore, the permanent footprint of the tower structures is less than one acre per tower; although this would

represent a loss of habitat for these species for the life of the project, in the context of the greater project area, which is largely undeveloped, this loss does not pose significant harm to the species or populations (EA, p. 4-27, 4-29, and 4-30).

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

The Proposed Action and/or alternatives do not threaten to violate any law (EA, pp. 1-4). The Proposed Action and alternatives are in compliance with the 43 CFR § 2800 regulations and consistent with RMP and Iditarod National Historic Trail CMP, which provide direction for the protection of the environment on public lands.

Conclusion

Therefore, on the basis of the information contained in the EA (DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2012-0036-EA), and all other information available to me, it is my determination that:

1. None of the environmental effects identified meet the definition of significance as defined by context and intensity considerations at 40 CFR § 1508.27;
2. The alternatives are in conformance with the Kobuk-Seward Resource Management Plan Record of Decision (2008); and
3. The Proposed Action and alternatives do not constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment.

Therefore, neither an Environmental Impact Statement nor a supplement to the existing EA is necessary and neither will be prepared.

/s/ Alan Bittner

June 19, 2013

Alan Bittner
Anchorage Field Manager

Date

/s/ Nichelle W. Jacobson

June 20, 2013

Shelly Jacobson
Central Yukon Field Manager

Date

Attachments

1. Unicom Incorporated, TERRA Northwest Phase III to Kotzebue Broadband Telecommunications Project, Environmental Assessment, DOI-BLM-AK-A010-2012-0036-EA. Released for public review on April 4, 2013.