

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
PALM SPRINGS-SOUTH COAST FIELD OFFICE**

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
EA Number DOI-BLM-CA-060-2012-0006-EA**

I. INTRODUCTION

TITLE / PROJECT TYPE: Avocado Flats utility line

CASE FILE / PROJECT NO: CACA-53157

BLM OFFICE: Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office
1201 Bird Center Drive
Palm Springs, CA 92262

APPLICANT / PROPONENT: San Diego Gas & Electric

LOCATION OF PROPOSED ACTION:

San Diego County, California, Township 8 S, Range 4 W, Section 26, S2. The site is located adjacent to an existing water tank with associated water line and access road in northern San Diego County, 0.65 miles south of the border of Riverside County and eight miles west of Interstate 15 (I-15).

PROJECT ACREAGE:

BLM	0.539	_____
Other Federal		_____
State		_____
Private	0.298	_____
Other (specify)		_____

USGS TOPOGRAPHIC MAP: Fallbrook Quadrangle

Land Use Plan and Other Regulatory Compliance: In accordance with Title 43 Code of Federal Regulations 1610.5-3, the proposed action and alternatives are in conformance with the following approved land use plan: South Coast Resource Management Plan (SCRMP) (1994).

Land Use Classification: South Coast Resource Management Plan (SCRMP). No land use classes have been designated for the project area, though the SCRMP does indicate that the area is to be managed for the conservation of riparian values.

This Environmental Assessment (EA) is being tiered to DOI-BLM-CA-060-0010-0029-EA Decision Record signed April 27, 2010.

A. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

The purpose and need of the proposed action is to provide efficient and cost effective power supply to the Avocado Flats communication site authorized for Riverside County under CACA-49505 issued on July 28, 2010. The proposed action is needed to grant San Diego Gas & Electric right-of-way (ROW) authorization to utilize federal lands to provide the County of Riverside's authorized communication use lease, Avocado Flats electrical services.

B. SCOPING, PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, AND ISSUES

This project was initially scoped internally with the BLM interdisciplinary team from November 7, 2011 thru January 9, 2012. It was also internally scoped for a final review prior to releasing for public review. Due to the close proximity to an existing authorization to the Fallbrook Public Utility District (FPUD) for a water storage tank and line, the FPUD has issued a separation requirement for safety measures; with these standards, it is not expected that there will be any issues. No issues were identified during the internal or external scoping done for this project.

II. PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action would consist of the construction, operation, and maintenance of the electrical alignment on BLM and private lands to provide electrical service to the authorized communication site. The project will involve 8 poles extending west from an existing take-off distribution pole P321082; installing 10 anchors; installing the associated overhead wires; and the meter device. The customer would install the underground conduit and the meter panel pedestal. A portion of this project resides on private land; New Poles 1-3 are on private while New Poles 5-8 are on BLM administrated lands and are located along the unnamed dirt road (gated and locked by FPUD) which would be shared access for BLM authorized users. See attached map (Exhibit A). New anchors will be installed approximately 25 feet north of New Pole 4, 25 feet north of New Pole 5, 25 feet south of New Pole 6, 25 feet north of New Pole 7, and 25 feet west of New Pole 8. Installation of the new poles and anchors would require excavating the holes using a truck-mounted auger and/or hand-held equipment with a compressor.

Existing dirt roads and cleared areas would be utilized for vehicle access; material staging; and installation of new poles, associated anchors and underground trench. No new access roads will be established and additional road improvements will not be required. The new anchor locations will be accessed on foot and will require vegetation trimming to facilitate access. A 2-foot wide footpath will be trimmed from the existing nearby access road to the anchor location. No clearing or grubbing vegetation will occur.

B. NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE

The no action alternative would be for the BLM to not authorize the right-of-way (ROW). This would result in the Proposed Action not being undertaken. Existing management and use of the site would continue subject to applicable statutes, regulations, policy and land use plans.

i. Alternatives Considered but not Analyzed in Detailed

No other reasonable alternative routes or modes were considered. Route selection was predicated upon access across private lands. It is also the shortest and most direct route to the point of connections with access from the private sector. Due to these conditions, no other alternative routes are considered physically or economically feasible.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

Environmental Element	Proposed Action	No Action Alternative
Air Quality	Present/Not Affected	No Issue
ACEC's	Not Present	No Issue
Cultural Resources	Not Present	No Issue
Native American Concerns	Not Present	No Issue
Farmlands	Not Present	No Issue
Floodplains	Not Present	No Issue
Energy (E.O. 13212)	Not Present	No Issue
Minerals	Present/Not Affected	No Issue
T&E Animal Species	Not Present	No Issue
T&E Plant Species	Not Present	No Issue
Invasive, Nonnative Species	Not Present	No Issue
Wastes (hazardous/solid)	Not Present	No Issue
Water Quality (surface and ground)	Not Present	No Issue
Wetlands/Riparian Zones	Not Present	No Issue
Wild and Scenic Rivers	Not Present	No Issue
Wilderness	Not Present	No Issue
Environmental Justice	Not Present	No Issue

Environmental Element	Proposed Action	No Action Alternative
Health and Safety Risks to Children	Not Present	No Issue
Visual Resource Mgmt.	Present/Not Affected	No Issue

Wildlife

Biological surveys of the project area were conducted June 24, 2009 by PBS&J and again November 11, 2011 by AECOM.

The southwestern pond turtle (*Actinemys marmorata pallida*), a Natural Communities Conservation Plan (NCCP)-covered wildlife species has been recorded within one mile of the project site but, was not observed at the project site during field surveys.

Southwestern pond turtle habitat includes ponds, lakes, rivers, streams (prefers pools and shallower areas), creeks, marshes, and irrigation ditches with abundant vegetation and either rocky or muddy bottoms, located in woodland, forest, and grassland. This species is mostly aquatic and moves to adjacent upland areas away from water sources for egg laying sites and to burrow underground for overwintering. The presence of a permanent aquatic habitat does not occur in the area immediately surrounding the project site. Therefore, suitable habitat for southwestern pond turtle does not occur at this site. This species was not observed during the surveys.

Suitable habitat for orange-throated whiptail (*Aspidoscelis hyperythra*), a California Species of Special Concern and a BLM sensitive species, occurs within the project area. This species was not observed during the surveys.

General wildlife species observed during field surveys included California towhee (*Melospiza crissalis*), western scrub-jay (*Aphelocoma californica*), bushtit (*Psaltriparus minimus*), band-tailed pigeon (*Patagioenas fasciata*), California thrasher (*Toxostoma redivivum*), phainopepla (*Phainopepla nitens*) and Bewick's wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*).

No habitat for any federally-listed threatened or endangered plant or animal species occurs within the project area.

Vegetation

Vegetation consists of coastal sage scrub, mixed chaparral, some landscape/ornamental and invasive plants: sugar bush (*Rhus ovata*), laurel sumac (*Malosma laurina*), coastal sagebrush (*Artemisia californica*), scrub oak (*Quercus berberidifolia*), bush monkeyflower (*Mimulus aurantiacus*), California buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*), coyote brush (*Baccharis pilularis*), mule-fat (*Baccharis salicifolia*), black sage (*Salvia mellifera*), chaparral candle (*Hesperoyucca whipplei*), sawtooth goldenbush (*Hazardia squarrosa*), San Diego wreath plant (*Stephanomeria diegensis*), chamise (*Adenostoma fasciculatum*), terragon (*Artemisia dracunculus*) totalote (*Centaurea melitensis*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), short-pod mustard (*Hirschfeldia incana*) and black mustard (*Brassica nigra*).

Parry's tetraococcus (*Tetraococcus dioicus*), a Natural Communities Conservation Plan (NCCP)-covered plant species has been recorded within one mile of the project site, but was not observed during field surveys.

Parry's tetraococcus habitat includes chaparral and coastal sage scrub. The blooming season for this species is April through May. This species is a perennial shrub that would have been detected during the survey, if present. Parry's tetraococcus was not observed at the project site or in the immediate surrounding area.

Cultural

A Cultural Resources Assessment for each of the project pole areas was prepared by AECOM at the request of San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E). The purpose of the assessment was to identify whether any cultural resources, including Historic Properties, would be affected by the proposed action. The report was prepared in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969; the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966, Section 106, as amended; Section 106 of the NHPA, as implemented at 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 800 and the BLM 8110 Manual, Identifying and Evaluating Cultural Resources. The report also reflected project specific requirements contained within the BLM Fieldwork Authorization (FA # 66.66 12-03).

An existing literature review and records search was conducted for the Avocado Flats communication site power alignment Area of Potential Effect (APE), and for all lands within one mile of the facility. The records search was initially conducted at the South Coastal Information Center (SCIC) at San Diego State University, San Diego, CA and provided to SDG&E under contract. The record search indicated that while cultural resources have been previously recorded outside a 1-mile radius of the project area, no cultural resources have been previously recorded within the project area. Based upon these results, known and recorded cultural resources are neither present within the APE nor within one mile in any direction. A Class III intensive pedestrian survey was conducted for the original tower location APE by a project archaeologist on November 22, 2011. The total survey area encompassed approximately 12.65 acres. During the pedestrian surveys, no previously undetected cultural resources were observed within or adjacent to the APE. Additional information regarding the assessment of this project site, including a detailed outline of the affected environment can be found in the Cultural Resources Assessment located in the case file.

Visual Resource Management

The site is located within an area of rolling hills that are typical of the coastal mountain ranges of southern California. The area has a decidedly rural feel and human use of the area is characterized by large-lot, estate-style residences and agricultural orchards.

The only area from which viewers can practically see the utility line is from several residences located east of the line. The closest residence is located approximately 0.25 miles east of the utility line. From this location the existing water tank beside which the communication tower will be located is visible atop a low hilltop to the west. For the most part, a viewer looking at the

site at large from this residence currently sees a series of rolling chaparral-covered hills with occasional rocky outcroppings. The water tank is visible but painted in earth tones and is not necessarily a dominant feature. For a visual overview of the site and the surrounding area, refer to the site photographs located in Exhibit 2.

Visual Resource Management (VRM) classifications were assigned to the area as part of the resource management planning process undertaken during preparation of the SCRMP. The SCRMP provided that management actions should conform to VRM Class 2 objectives within Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) and VRM Class 3 objectives in all other areas. The project site is not within an ACEC, so VRM Class 3 objectives apply to the Avocado Flats utility line project. Management objectives for areas within this class are to partially retain the existing character of the landscape, and the level of change to the characteristic landscape should be moderate. According to the VRM directives for this class, management activities in these areas may attract attention but should not dominate the view of the casual observer, and any changes should repeat the basic elements found in the predominant view of the characteristic landscape.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

A. Cultural Resources –

The results of the records searches and the Class III intensive pedestrian survey indicate that no known or recorded cultural resources are located within the project area for this undertaking. These negative findings for cultural resources are consistent with an earlier archaeological survey report completed in 1972 for portions of the project area. In addition, no known or recorded cultural resources are located within one mile of the project area.

This undertaking would not adversely affect any known or recorded cultural resources within the project area, including Historic Properties, defined as cultural resources included in or eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP).

B. Wildlife -

Suitable habitat for orange-throated whiptail occurs within the project area. This species, however, was not observed on or in the vicinity of the project area and due to the limited impact associated with this project; populations of this species would not be adversely affected if it did occur on site.

The project area and vicinity contain suitable nesting habitat for avian species. Construction activities have potential to affect nesting avian species protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) if those activities take place within the avian nesting season.

C. Vegetation/Habitat

Permanent impacts will result from the loss of area on the ground due to pole installation. Temporary impacts associated with pole installation activities will result from excavation of the pole hole, placement of the excavated soil adjacent to the hole, and impacts caused by crew members accessing and walking on the areas around the pole sites. Permanent and temporary impacts for a pole installation are approximately 2 square feet and 34 square feet respectively, for a total of 36 square feet of impacts. The footprint for anchor installation is approximately 36 square feet (6 foot by 6 foot work area). Impacts associated with anchor installation are considered temporary. Impacts for the underground trench are considered temporary and are calculated based on the length and width of the work area for installation. Impacts associated with footpath access are considered temporary.

A total of 16 square feet of permanent impacts (12 square feet to NCCP-covered habitat) are anticipated to occur as a result of the project. A total of 1,032 square feet of temporary impacts (779 square feet to NCCP-covered habitat, including 340 square feet of footpath impacts) are anticipated to occur as a result of the project.

Mitigation Measures

Cultural

In the event cultural resources are encountered during ground-disturbing activities, work in the immediate vicinity will be suspended until the discovery is assessed by a qualified archaeologist, the SDG&E and the BLM archaeologists are contacted, and treatment is determined. In the event human remains are encountered during ground disturbing activities, all work shall cease and the county coroner shall be contacted per the California Public Resources Code. Should the remains be identified as Native American, the Native American Heritage Commission shall be contacted within 48 hours to provide a Most Likely Descendent (MLD) to determine reburial practices for the remains.

Biological

A qualified biologist shall survey for active nests prior to any vegetation disturbance, if work occurs during the bird breeding season (February – August). In order to ensure that nests/habitats are not impacted, if an active nest is found, the biologist shall determine the extent of the bird's habitat and flag those boundaries which must be avoided.

Crews shall travel in and out along the same route when accessing the pole and anchor locations to minimize impacts to the surrounding habitat.

All applicable operational protocols from Chapter 7 of the SDG&E NCCP shall be followed.

Mitigation required of SDG&E under the NCCP:

The project site is located in designated Preserve.

Per Table 7.4 of the NCCP, permanent impacts to NCCP-covered habitat within a designated Preserve will be mitigated at a ratio of 2:1. No mitigation is required for permanent impacts to non-NCCP-covered habitat. SDG&E proposes to mitigate for 12 square feet of permanent impacts through drawdown of 24 credits from the SDG&E mitigation bank.

SDG&E is not proposing to mitigate for the temporary impacts associated with the footpaths of 2 feet or less in width. This exception is based on a high probability that the trimming of branches without clearing or grubbing vegetation will successfully be restored without intervention or enhancement. Therefore, SDG&E is not proposing to mitigate for the 340 square feet of temporary impacts associated with footpath access throughout the project.

Per Table 7.4 of the NCCP, temporary impacts greater than 500 square feet to NCCP-covered habitat within the designated Preserve will be mitigated at a ratio of 2:1. No mitigation is required for temporary impacts to non-NCCP-covered habitat. Cumulative temporary impacts to NCCP-covered habitat are greater than 500 square feet. Therefore, SDG&E proposes to mitigate for the 439 square feet of temporary impacts to NCCP-covered habitat associated with pole and anchor installations throughout the project through a drawdown of 439 credits from the SDG&E mitigation bank.

SDG&E proposes to mitigate for permanent impacts and temporary impacts through a total drawdown of 463 credits from the SDG&E mitigation bank.

V. TRIBES, INDIVIDUALS, ORGANIZATIONS, or AGENCIES CONSULTED:

Fish and Wildlife Consultation - Consultation by the BLM with the Service was not required for this project, as there would be no impacts to threatened or endangered plant or animal species, or species proposed as candidates for listing as threatened or endangered.

SDG&E has consulted with the Service on their Operational Protocols under the Natural Communities Conservation Plan.

AECOM (formerly EDAW, Inc.)

VI. LIST OF PREPARERS:

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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT CONSIDERATIONS:

Public comments submitted for this environmental assessment, including names and street addresses of respondents, will be available for public review at the Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office during regular business hours (8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.), Monday through Friday, except holidays. Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment – including your personal identifying information – may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so. All submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, will be made available for public inspection in their entirety.

