

**UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
SAN LUIS VALLEY FIELD OFFICE**

**DECISION RECORD
Rebuild of Xcel Transmission Lines Project
DOI-BLM-CO-300-2013-0006-EA**

DECISION: It is my decision to authorize the Proposed Action as described in Alternative A of the attached EA. The selected action is located on BLM lands managed by the San Luis Valley Field Office and on Forest Service lands managed by the Salida Ranger District, San Isabel National Forest, located in Chaffee County, and Saguache County, Colorado.

The proposed action includes:

COP-058402, line # 6905 - pole replacement will be upgraded with new single wooden pole structures. Height will vary between 75 and 120 feet above the ground, and the average height would be approximately 20 to 50 feet taller than the existing poles. Structures will be reduced from 897 to approximately 435 due to the increased height and being spaced further apart. The transmission line will be upgraded from a 69-kV line to a 115-kV line, in order to increase the capacity and improve reliability of the line.

COP-51234, line # 6920 - the new transmission line structures would be similar to the existing structures. The pole heights would vary between 75 and 120 feet above the ground, and the average heights would be approximately 20 to 50 feet taller than the existing poles. The total number of structures would be reduced from 94 to approximately 55. This would be upgraded from a 69-kV line to a 115-kV line. The width of the Right of Way would increase from 30 feet to 75 feet in order to comply with National Electric Safety Code (NESC) Compliance Standards.

COC-012906-01, line # 9811 - the new transmission line structures would be H-Frame and would be very similar to the existing structures. The new dual-pole structures would be approximately 14 feet wide from pole to pole, which is slightly wider than the existing structures that are 12.5 feet wide. The pole height would vary between 75 and 120 feet above the ground and the average pole height would be approximately 5 to 10 feet taller than the existing poles. The total number of structures would be reduced from 601 to approximately 485 due to the increased height and being spaced further apart. The line will maintain its current voltage of 115-kV.

The proposed action was analyzed in the Environmental Analysis (EA) DOI-BLM-CO-300-2013-0006-EA and a Finding of No Significant Impact was reached, therefore, an EIS will not be prepared. This decision is in conformance with the San Luis Resource Area Resource Management Plan, and the Pike and San Isabel National Forests LRMP, as detailed in Sections 1.6.1 and 1.6.2 of the EA.

RATIONALE: This action will allow Xcel to rebuild three existing vintage power lines with newer and taller poles while using fewer poles. Also, Xcel will increase the voltage on two of these lines from a 69-kV to 115-kV. The power line rebuild project would help meet future electrical power demands and increase power reliability for the San Luis Valley.

The Bureau of Land Management completed Endangered Species Act consultation with the USFWS and determined that the project is not likely to adversely affect the following listed species: Gunnison Sage Grouse, Canada Lynx, Mexican Spotted Owl, or the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher.

The EA analyzes two action alternatives for this project. The first, proposed by the applicant, was to replace the existing above-ground infrastructure with new above-ground infrastructure. The second alternative, propose in public comment, was to bury portions of the infrastructure through occupied Gunnison Sage Grouse habitat. The BLM took a hard look at both of these alternatives and chose maintaining above ground infrastructure through the Gunnison Sage Grouse habitat.

The rationale for this decision is well-captured in Section 2.1.4 of the Environmental Assessment. As the analysis shows, the amount of GUSG habitat disturbance required to bury an 8.8-mile power facility is far greater than replacing existing power poles and would have a disproportionate impact on the very limited number of grouse in the area. Additionally, because the proponent will be increasing the height of the poles, the number of poles within the occupied habitat will be reduced by nearly half (from 214 structures to 121). By reducing the total number of possible perches, plus adding anti-perch hardware to the remaining poles, the opportunities for predator perching will be greatly reduced. The BLM has worked closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to design appropriate mitigation for the impacts of this project and we are pleased with our common understanding regarding the effects of the project.

MITIGATION MEASURES/MONITORING:

The applicant will follow the mitigation and monitoring measures that are listed below.

Proposed Project Phase	Affected Resources	Applicant-Committed Measures and BMPs
Pre-Disturbance/ Planning	General	A construction monitoring plan will be developed to monitor the implementation of BMPs during construction.
Pre-Disturbance/ Planning	General	All on-site crews will receive environmental training to include the importance of staying on defined access routes and within the ROW.
Pre-Disturbance/ Planning	Cultural Resources	Impacts will be minimized by designing pole placement, access roads, and associated construction so that it occurs outside of cultural resource boundaries within the permanent ROW. All on-site crews will be educated on the protection of cultural resources and the procedures to cease work and notify the proper authorities in the case of unanticipated discoveries.
Construction	General	Grading and clearing activities will be minimized, and disturbances will be stabilized as soon as practicable.

Proposed Project Phase	Affected Resources	Applicant-Committed Measures and BMPs
Construction	General	Vehicle speed restrictions will be enforced to reduce potential for accidents, noise and dust creation.
Construction	Soils, Aesthetics	<p>Permanent or temporary soil erosion control measures for all slopes, channels, ditches, disturbed land area, and soil stockpiles would be implemented as soon as practicable after final grading or the final earth disturbance has been completed. When it is not possible to permanently stabilize a disturbed area after an earth disturbance has been completed or where significant earth disturbance activity temporarily ceases, temporary erosion control measures would be implemented as soon as practicable.</p> <p>Once ground disturbing activities are complete, but during the appropriate season, Xcel will revegetate the disturbed area to individual plant densities of at least 70 percent pre-disturbance levels, or implement equivalent permanent erosion reduction methods, reducing the long-term impacts from sedimentation. If any aggregate is used on site, it will be color-matched to local soils to further limit the long-term visual impact of grading and stabilizing activities.</p> <p>A revegetation plan would be developed in coordination with BLM, Forest Service, USFWS, and other stakeholders, as appropriate.</p>
Construction	Soils	Construction will not occur when the soil is too wet to adequately support construction equipment, if such equipment creates ruts in excess of 4 inches deep. Track out onto public roadways will be monitored and cleaned up as appropriate.
Construction	Water Resources	Erosion and sedimentation to streams will be reduced by minimizing stream crossings and construction activities near riparian and wetland areas. Existing stream crossings will be used where possible. A 300-foot-wide buffer for construction activities will be used on each side of perennial and intermittent streams.
Construction	Water Resources	Structural BMPs (for example, diversion structures, silt fences, plant buffers, slope roughening, wattles and retention ponds) and nonstructural BMPs (for example, preserving natural vegetation, preventative maintenance, training, inspections, and spill response procedures) will be employed, as appropriate.
Construction	Air Quality	To limit the emission of fugitive particulate matter, BMPs will be employed as appropriate, including using wind breaks and barriers, applying water frequently, applying soil additives, controlling vehicle access and flow routes, covering piles, using gravel at site exit points, controlling traffic speed, washing equipment at the end of each work day and prior to site removal, reestablishing ground cover, and stopping work.
Construction	Air Quality	Work vehicles will be well-maintained and could use diesel particle filters to reduce emissions.

Proposed Project Phase	Affected Resources	Applicant-Committed Measures and BMPs
Construction	Biological Resources	<p>Native seed mixture will be used for revegetation activities. BMPs in the Gunnison Basin Candidate Conservation Agreement, Appendix A (CCA 2013), will be followed, including restoring native vegetation in GuSG habitat disturbed by construction.</p> <p>Specifically, for this project BLM recommends the following seed mixtures be used: 1.) in areas where the primary vegetation component consists of winterfat (limey bench sites) seed mixture should be blue grama 30%; Indian ricegrass or western wheatgrass 30%; and, winterfat 40% , 2.) in areas where there is less winterfat, seed mixture should more closely resemble: Indian ricegrass 40%; Western wheatgrass 30% ; and, blue grama 30%, and, 3.) in areas with other grasses, forbs or shrubs, seed mixtures for four-wing saltbush and fringed sage should be used.</p> <p>The USFWS will be contacted for input and recommendations on seed mixtures prior to implementation of the revegetation plan.</p>
Construction	Biological Resources	<p>Non-native weeds will be controlled by limiting the number of construction vehicles, washing vehicles, using certified weed-free seed and straw, and conducting pre-disturbance weed surveys.</p>
Construction	Biological Resources	<p>To minimize impacts to migratory birds, construction will occur outside the typical breeding season for migratory birds. Although the provisions of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act apply year-round, most nesting activity occurs between April 1 and July 15. However, some migratory birds nest outside of this loosely defined period. If proposed activities must occur during the nesting season, or at any other time that may result in the “take” of migratory birds, a qualified biologist will conduct pre- work field surveys of the affected habitats or structures, during the nesting season, to verify the presence or absence of nesting migratory birds and eagles.</p>
Construction	Biological Resources	<p>Seasonal restrictions to avoid raptor nest impacts will be implemented as part of construction. No construction will occur between November 15 and March 15 within a 0.25-mile radius of an active bald eagle winter night roost, if no direct line of sight exists. No construction will occur within 0.5-mile radius if there is a direct line of sight. All site visits within the buffer radius will be conducted between 10 am and 2 pm from November 15 to March 15.</p>
Construction	Biological Resources	<p>Construction activities will be avoided in pronghorn winter concentration areas from January 1 to March 31, and in pronghorn concentration areas from May 15 to July 31.</p>
Construction	Biological Resources	<p>Gunnison’s prairie dog colonies identified during the 2013 reconnaissance surveys will be avoided.</p>
Construction	Biological Resources	<p>To avoid disturbance to GuSG during lekking and brood rearing seasons, construction activities will not occur within GuSG-occupied habitat between March 1 and July 15.</p>
Construction	Biological Resources	<p>The seasonal restrictions recommended by CPW and outlined in CPW’s Raptor Buffer Guidelines will be followed.</p>

Proposed Project Phase	Affected Resources	Applicant-Committed Measures and BMPs
Construction	Biological Resources	Helicopter flights will be prohibited from March 1 through August 31 to avoid Mexican spotted owl (MSO) breeding and nesting season. Construction in potential MSO habitat (as defined by Forest Service in Figure 4-1) will be avoided in MSO habitat from March 1 through August 31.
Construction	Biological Resources	All transmission line structures installed through GuSG-occupied habitat as part of the proposed project will be new and outfitted with raptor perching deterrents.
Construction	Biological Resources	Transmission lines through GuSG-occupied habitat will be marked to avoid avian collision impacts. The transmission lines will be constructed in accordance with recommendations and standards outlined in the APLIC's <i>Suggested Practices for Avian Protection On Power Lines: The State of the Art in 2006</i> and <i>Reducing Avian Collisions with Power Lines: The State of the Art in 2012</i> (APLIC 2012).
Construction	Cultural Resources	If any inadvertent discoveries are located during construction, the BLM cultural resources staff will be notified in accordance with applicable guidance and law.
Construction	Noise	Proper and properly maintained safety equipment, including mufflers, dampeners, covers, and vibration isolators, will be used.
Construction	Range Management	Every effort will be made to avoid disturbing or altering fences. Gates will be used when possible and will be closed immediately after passing through them. If a fence must be crossed, it will be let down or cut (as determined by the grazing lessee or owner/operator), crossed, and immediately put back up. The wires will be stretched to the original tension from the nearest brace or gate panel. Any and all facilities damaged, destroyed, or removed in connection with construction will be immediately restored to original condition or replaced with a similar facility.
Maintenance	Soils, Biological Resources	All BMPs will be inspected and maintained on site as required. Sediment control logs, brush barriers, and rock logs used during construction will be maintained in place as needed until vegetation is established to the required density.
Maintenance	Biological Resources	The Applicant will implement the corvid nest removal and monitoring program (in Appendix G on BA) once construction begins and for 5 years after construction is complete. Corvid nest removal should occur before the GuSG lekking/nesting season (i.e., February).

CULTURAL RESOURCES: The Bureau of Land Management, the Colorado State Historic Preservation Office, and Xcel Energy have entered in a Memorandum of Agreement regarding the treatment of cultural resources within the project area in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act. In addition to avoiding cultural sites within the project area, an historic context study of the electrification of the San Luis Valley has been developed and will be distributed.

PUBLIC COMMENT AND INPUT: The BLM engaged the public at multiple stages throughout the drafting of this Environmental Analysis. The BLM held a 30-day public scoping period from

July 29, 2013 to August 28, 2013. The BLM released a draft EA for a thirty day public comment period starting February 9, 2015. Appendices D & E of the EA include a scoping report and BLM's responses to comments on the draft EA. All input received during the scoping phase and on the draft EA was fully considered and incorporated in the EA, as appropriate. The BLM thanks all those individuals and organizations who provided input on the project.

PROTEST/APPEALS: This decision shall take effect immediately upon the date it is signed by the Authorized Officer, and shall remain in effect while any appeal is pending unless the Interior Board of Land Appeals issues a stay (43 CFR 2801.10(b)). Any appeal of this decision must follow the procedures set forth in 43 CFR Part 4. Within 30 days of the decision, a notice of appeal must be filed in the office of the Authorized Officer at the San Luis Valley Field Office, 1313 East Hwy 160, Monte Vista, Colorado, 81144. If a statement of reasons for the appeal is not included with the notice, it must be filed with the Interior Board of Land Appeals, Office of Hearings and Appeals, U.S. Department of the Interior, 801 North Quincy St., Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22203 within 30 days after the notice of appeal is filed with the Authorized Officer.

SIGNATURE OF AUTHORIZED OFFICIAL:



Paul Tigan, Acting Field Office Manager

DATE SIGNED:

9/28/2015

ATTACHMENTS: