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WHITNEY BELL: Welcome, everyone, to the North plains connector scoping meeting. I'm Whitney Bell with ICF, and I'll be your host today. Before we get started, I just have a few housekeeping items for us to cover. This presentation portion of the Webex meeting is being recorded and may be used by the US Department of Energy.

If you do not wish to have your voice recorded, please do not speak during the call. If you do not wish to have your image recorded, please turn off your camera or participate by phone. If you speak during the call or use a video connection, you are presumed consent to recording and use of your voice or image.

A copy of today's presentation will be posted on the Department of Energy's North Plains Connector web page by next week. The recording of today's meeting will be available on the same page in about two weeks. You can find the link to that web page in the chat now.

As a reminder, third party AI meeting assistants are not allowed in this meeting. Any unverified or suspicious meeting participants will be removed and/or not admitted at all. If one is found operating in the call during the meeting, the owner or user will be contacted to have the records deleted.

If you have any technical issues, you may type them in the chat and send to ICF tech host and we'll be able to help you troubleshoot whatever issue you may be having. And then if you need to view live captioning, please refer to the link that will appear in the chat now.

Following today's presentation, we will stop the recording and open the floor for questions. Please submit all of your questions in the chat and kindly keep your microphones muted throughout the meeting. Please note that questions and comments sent via chat during today's meeting will not be recorded as official comments.

I'm going to say that one more time. Any questions and comments sent via chat during today's meeting will not be recorded as official comments. These official comments must be submitted in writing by December 9 via either email, which is the preferred method at northplainsconnector@hq.doe.gov, or mailed to the address on the screen, and both of those should be in the chat now.

All right. With all of those housekeeping and announcements out of the way, let's go ahead and get started. Today, we'll hear from RJ Boyle. She's the NEPA Document Manager with the Grid Deployment Office. RJ, the floor is yours.

RJ BOYLE: Thank you, Whitney. And hi all again, Thanks for joining us at the Department of Energy and Montana Department of Environmental Quality's scoping meeting for the North Plains Connector Project. My name is RJ Boyle and I am the Document Manager for the Department of Energy's-- for the Department of Energy. I'm sorry.

I'm joined by members of the Montana Department of Environmental Quality, as well as staff from the three federal agencies that will be involved in this project, and that is staff from the Bureau of Land Management, staff from US Forest Service, as well as staff from the Agricultural Research Service. And we also have some contracting staff with us today. And the project proponent for the North Plains Connector Project, Grid United, has joined us as well.

So I will be walking through why we, DOE, are here today, along with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality and what we're looking for in terms of scoping input. We'll also discuss how all agencies play a role in this upcoming environmental review process.
I will also provide a project overview, so talking through the purpose and need of the North Plains Connector Project, show a project map, talk through alternative routes that you may or may not have seen in our notice of intent that was published in October. And I'll also talk about project components. Finally, I will dig into how you all can comment on the project and where you can go to get more information online.
We'll keep hitting on this date that's dropped in the chat. All comments are due on December 9. We will also do Q&A after we get through the presentation and we'll leave you all with how to follow up with us after the meeting. Whitney mentioned that we are recording this portion of the meeting.
We will be providing the presentation at the top of each hour, so here at 12, at 1, and at 2. We are recording our 12 meeting so that it will be available after today on our website for folks to review later. But in order to allow folks to ask questions freely, we will stop the recording after that first presentation and just carry on with repeating the presentation for anyone who joins us late and leaving the door open for questions throughout those next few iterations of the presentation.

So I will jump right into it. Why are we here today? Why is the Department of Energy here today? How does that work with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality? What about all these acronyms that we saw in the notice of intent that was published on October 25?
So you might have seen last month that we released this thing called an NOI, or a notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement or an EIS for the North Plains Connector Project. What does that mean? North Plains Connector Project is a proposed transmission line that would run from Montana to North Dakota.
The project is proposed crosses federal lands managed by three federal agencies, the BLM, or Bureau of Land Management, US Forest Service, and Agricultural Research Service, or ARS. That means that these agencies must issue permits and authorizations for the project to be built across their lands. Before issuing those permits, the project must comply with-- or the agencies must comply with specific federal and state level regulations to evaluate the consequences of issuing permits that would allow the line to be constructed and cross their lands.
The first and most primary consideration here is the National Environmental Policy Act, or NEPA, which governs how reviews are completed for the project and for how agencies evaluate their actions. The evaluation of potential impacts of the proposed project are then considered in that environmental impact statement or EIS.
Under NEPA, the three federal agencies have signed agreements with DOE, where DOE will help prepare the EIS that will describe the impact of the project for those three agencies. And then those three agencies will use this as the basis for their decision to grant or deny the permits and authorizations to the project proponent for building the project.
At the state level, the project is also in need of a certificate from the Montana Department of Environmental Quality under the Montana Major Facility Siting Act, or MFSA, which requires certificates for projects that are over a certain size and over a certain length in the State of Montana. This then triggers Montana's state level NEPA, known as MEPA, the Montana Environmental Policy Act.

And like NEPA, MEPA aims to ensure that state agencies like the Montana Department of Environmental Quality consider environmental consequences of their actions and promote informed decision making.
So to ensure that the North Plains Connector Project complies with both these federal and state requirements around documenting potential impacts on the environment, DOE and Montana Department of Environmental Quality are going to jointly prepare this EIS to document the consequences for the three federal agencies, BLM, Forest Service and ARS and the single state agency Montana DEQ for issuing permits and authorizations for the project.
So that was a lot of regulatory discussion. If there are questions on that, please be sure to drop those in the chat so that we can elaborate further. For now, more detail on DOE's role as the lead and what kind of authority we have to do so, in addition to NEPA, DOE has authority under what is known as the Federal Power Act to lead the environmental review process, and DOE then will act as the lead federal agency to coordinate compliance and the various reviews needed for the project. And the three federal agencies are joining as cooperating agencies.
DOE can be thought of as maybe quarterbacking or project managing the environmental analysis. But this is not to downplay the role. DOE is the lead and is on the hook to ensure that this jointly prepared EIS meets all the requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act and the Montana Environmental Policy Act.
And DOE is here to ensure that streamline-- that communication is streamlined among agencies as well as impacted stakeholders, and to ensure that there is open and transparent communication on the project between members of the public and the agencies involved here.
DOE will be inviting any other federal agencies, tribes, state governments, local governments or other stakeholders with expertise related to this project to collaborate as cooperating agencies. Any others would then be included as a part of the public that are invited to provide input throughout the NEPA process, which includes this scoping period that we're in right now.

So with all the roles and responsibilities somewhat clarified or complicated, that does bring us to the reason why we're here today, which is scoping. Scoping is a phase in the MEPA, NEPA process that agencies are required to undertake when they decide to prepare an EIS to evaluate the impact of an action they might take.
So the NOI that I mentioned at the top of this presentation marks the start of a public scoping period and it is used to engage the state, local, and tribal governments, members of the public, et cetera in early identification of concerns, potential impacts and relevant effects of past actions on the project, and also a place to invite possible alternative actions for the project into the discussion.
During this scoping period, under MEPA, NEPA, agencies have to hold these public scoping meetings, like the one we're doing today and the ones that we had over the past few weeks in person in Montana and North Dakota, to help identify important issues and concerns with the project that must be included or should be included in the draft's environmental impact statement.
So that's what we, DOE, Montana Department of Environmental Quality and the three federal agencies need from you today-- comments, questions, concerns around this project to ensure that the EIS we prepare, captures and describes the consequences of this action fully and accurately. DOE and DEQ are ultimately responsible for determining the scope and breadth of this EIS. But we need to hear from you all to do that.

To give you a better sense of what comes after today's meeting, we have a general timeline of the environmental review process on the screen today. There's a red star showing where we currently are, which is that release of the NOI, which was on October 25 and the start of the scoping period, which will run for 45 days. So that is that December 9 date from the-- yeah.

So after this scoping period concludes on December 9, DOE, DEQ, BLM, Forest Service and ARS will meet to review scoping comments and begin preparations of their first draft EIS. DOE and DEQ will then plan to release this draft EIS in the fall of next year. And that, the EIS publication date will then include another 45 day comment period when our collaborators and members of the public are invited to review and comment on the draft EIS.

The agencies will then come together to review those comments and begin preparation of the final EIS and draft records of decision. The plan will then be to release a final EIS documenting how comments were incorporated into the document in summer of 2026.

Shortly after that, the agencies will-- the three federal agencies in Montana, DEQ will issue records of decision around the issuance of their permits and certificates, and the environmental review process will conclude.

I have a more in-depth set of slides showing some of the dates that we've been going through in the scoping period and then looking ahead on the next slide. So you'll see here that we have been in person in North Dakota, in Montana earlier this month, and that we are holding our virtual scoping meeting today, the 19th.

And to the point of over informing you, December 9 is the end of our comment period for the scoping portion of this NEPA review. And from there, we will be releasing our EIS in the fall of 2025. And then to reiterate, the draft will be available in summer 2026 and records of decision issued around fall of 2026.

So now that we've gone through the environmental review process, we'll get into the project itself, North Plains Connector. So North Plains Connector or NPC is a proposed 525 kilovolts, high voltage direct current HVDC overhead transmission line that would provide 3,000 megawatts of bidirectional transfer capacity to connect the Western and Eastern interconnections. I may also identify those as the Western and Eastern grids.

As proposed. North Plains Connector would run from Colstrip, Montana to two separate endpoints in North Dakota. One is near Center and the other is near St. Anthony. North Plains Connector plans to sell or transfer electricity transmission capacity with no particular preference to a generation technology. And in terms of ownership, portions of the line or rights to capacity may be owned by electric utilities, cooperatives, government entities, corporate energy providers or independent generators in the regional power systems.

So that brings us to the purpose and need of the project. And purpose in need is a specific term used in MEPA and NEPA to talk about the why and what of an action that becomes a part of the basis for issuing a permitting decision. So each agency does have its own special purpose and need related specifically to the issuance of a permit that they must do.

But all agencies here agree on this generalized purpose and need for the project, which is to enhance the reliability, capacity and efficiency between the Eastern and Western grids to create new markets for energy generation and to mitigate impacts from weather related outages by allowing grid operators to quickly and efficiently shift power to where it's needed most across the Eastern and Western grids.

I'm now showing a map on the screen of the project that I just previously described, running from Colstrip to Center and St. Anthony. It's shown in green, blue and orange to demarcate some project components that I'll dig into shortly. And I will flag here that this map that we are showing on screen is available on our DOE project information web page for you all to view in maybe a larger screen or more at your own leisure.

So the next slide I have is kind of a graphic description of the map that I just demonstrated, showing all the components of the project that will be used. The blue items are new infrastructure that will be constructed over the course of the project.

And then the gold items are either already existing components or are being planned independently of the project. We have, again, information on our DOE web page talking in great detail on each of these components. And so we encourage you to go to that web page to read up on those details as well as in our notice of intent that we published on October 25.

Our next slide shows a figure of the primary infrastructure that would be used for the transmission lines. So these are monopoles. The monopole heights would range from 140 feet to 165 feet with some variation in there that certain heights could be as low as 100 or as high as 195. And then the project also could potentially rely on lattice tower structures to ensure safe construction and operation in certain areas, like areas with steep topography where such a tower would be needed.

Our last component for discussion today is just this diagram representative of a converter station. We have on either end of the line, shown in that graphic, two converter stations that would be built for the project. This is the station that's used to convert power from AC to DC and back. And this is a graphic showing the layout of those stations.

There are footprints associated with the substations. And Rosebud substation, which is on the Montana end, has an estimated footprint of 39 acres. And then Morton County has an estimated footprint of 24 acres.

We'll now talk about alternatives and alternative routes, which is something that folks may have seen in our NOI on October 25. And I'm showing a screen of those alternatives-- or a map of those alternatives on screen now. And we'll try and walk through those in very brief detail over the next few slides.

In general, key things to note around alternatives is that these are things that must be considered in order to create a baseline of comparison between the proposed action and other actions that could be taken so that agencies have the ability to fully evaluate the potential effects of the proposed action, which is that project overview line that I showed previously.

There are a number of considerations that were used to develop these alternative routes, which include suggestions from agencies and other stakeholders, ideas around maximizing co-location of this proposed line with already existing linear utilities, and ways to avoid or minimize impacts on other environmental resources like wildlife or other natural and cultural resources.

During scoping, DOE welcomes comments on all of these alternatives as well as suggestions for additional alternatives or even revisions to the proposed action alternative. DOE, in coordination with DEQ and the relevant federal agencies, may include additional routes, remove alternative routes seen in the NOI, or change components of the alternative or proposed action routes based on input received during the scoping process.

So again, our NOI and our website have lots of details on the alternatives. We encourage you to read those, but I'll also take the next six slides to give the briefest of overviews on what we're seeing on the screen currently.

So the first alternative route that you may see summarized in the NOI is this route called the Northern Route, which is dark blue. And then the light blue on the map is the proposed action route. We're just trying to show the differences between the two on this map.

This route was intended to maximize co-location with existing linear utilities near interstate 94 and minimize impacts to wildlife like sage grouse. So those are the considerations that went into that route drawing. You'll start seeing a theme because a lot of these have very similar considerations a part of them.

The next is the central route alternative, which is orange on the screen, again, compared against the light blue proposed action route. This was designed to avoid challenges associated with the Yellowstone River Valley and also to avoid congested highway corridors and urban development near Mile City. And that on our map is just slightly north of the Custer County label on the map. The central route alternative also tried to strike a balance by incorporating stakeholder feedback associated with co-location of the line with other infrastructure.

Next, we have what's known as the Southern route. Again, light blue, showing proposed action. Purple is the Southern route. This route intended to-- or intends to take advantage of less steep topography east of Colstrip compared to other routing options.

This route would be 25 miles shorter than the light blue proposed option route. But there were accessibility-- there are accessibility constraints east of the Powder River, which is located near the highway 59 label on the map. That would require engineering roadways and long access roads. So those are other considerations that the team is making.

The next component that we have is the Tongue River Route, which is white on the map compared to our light blue proposed action. This was derived from the Southern Route alternative, so what we saw just now, but instead goes through the Tongue River Valley and is parallel to I-94. This route's almost 30 miles shorter than the light blue route.

But it doesn't-- and it doesn't cross ARS lands and it avoids a lot of sage grouse habitat. But there are a number of tribal resources and protected species along this route that have been previously identified during surveys. So that's another thing too. That's another factor that is being balanced when considering an alternative like this against the proposed action.

Finally, we have this Eastern route shown in green. This was designed prior to the addition of 22 miles for the Morton County switchyard and the 22 mile transmission line in Morton County, North Dakota, to the project, proposed project. So this doesn't include the interconnection described in the proposed route near St. Anthony, which is shown in that light blue route off the page on the proposed action.

The primary considerations around this route were trying to again, align with existing linear utilities, trying to parallel 94 and following recommendations from federal agencies where the project may or should cross. Also considered avoidance of sage grouse habitat and other natural resources.

So now that kind of gives you a background into how this route was designed for the project. You can, again, explore these routes in more detail by reading our notice of intent, which is available on our website and also using our partner Montana DEQ's website to play around with their mapping tool.

Montana has mapping data only for their state, but we are working with them to have North Dakota information on that mapping tool as well for folks to explore. And we encourage folks to use that.
Now that we've shared all this information about the project and the environmental review process, this is me once again returning to what we're doing here today, which is asking you all to comment on what's been proposed in our NOI and what should be seen in our DEIS in the fall. The screen shows currently what Whitney mentioned at the top of our presentation, which is where you can submit comments either via email or by mail, and those addresses have been listed in the chat.
And then I'll importantly underline that all comments must be submitted in writing via email or mail. We are not taking anyone's questions today as comments a part of that scoping process. If you would like questions asked here or any follow up information that you would like included in our analysis, it must be submitted as a scoping comment via email or mail.