

Categorical Exclusion Determination

Western Area Power Administration
Department of Energy



Proposed Action: 2025 Path 15 Transmission Line Access Road Sinkhole Repair

Project No.: 2025_01a

Project Manager: Ricardo Velarde

Location: Western Fresno County, CA

Categorical Exclusion Applied (from Subpart D, 10 C.F.R. Part 1021): B1.3 Routine Maintenance

Description of the Proposed Action:

Western Area Power Administration (WAPA), Sierra Nevada Region is responsible for the operation and maintenance (O&M) of several federally owned and operated transmission lines throughout California, including the Los Banos-Gates #3 transmission line (Path 15). Part of this responsibility includes ensuring WAPA maintains reliable access to transmission towers and other facilities to comply with the National Electric Safety Code, Western States Coordinating Council, and WAPA directives for protecting human safety and maintaining the reliable operation of the transmission system.

On January 6, 2025, WAPA's roads maintenance coordinator requested an expedited review for repair of a newly discovered sinkhole which created a hazardous condition on the access road near mile 48 of the Path 15 transmission line (coordinates 36.51146° N, 120.50010° W, western Fresno County). During this week, WAPA's contracted road crew was working on similar repairs within a couple miles of this site and was available to respond to this site for repairs. Equipment available for the project included hand tools (shovels), a road grader, a vibratory roller, a small tractor with a front-end loader with a box grader attachment, and a water truck. Crews planned, to use local disturbed soil or aggregate base to repair erosion damage and re-establish a solid road base.

WAPA's erosion repair and routine road maintenance activities utilize best management practices for soil stabilization and runoff control.

Informal review of this project, including field surveys, was completed January 6-8, 2025, with the conclusion that a categorical exclusion was appropriate for this project, though the paperwork would need to be completed afterward due to staff availability. The project was completed in approximately an hour on January 8, 2025. Final approval and signature of the CX was further delayed per January 20, 2025 DOE direction to suspend all NEPA reviews agency-wide pending an administrative review.

Findings:

WAPA follows the regulations at 40 C.F.R. Parts 1500-1508, in addition to the Department of Energy's (DOE) regulations implementing National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) at 10 C.F.R. Part 1021 to meet the agency's obligations under NEPA, 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321 et seq. In accordance with Section 1021.410(b) DOE's NEPA Regulations (57 FR 15144, Apr. 24, 1992, as amended at 61 FR 36221-36243, Jul. 9, 1996; 61 FR 64608, Dec. 6, 1996, 76 FR 63764, Nov. 14, 2011), WAPA has determined that the proposed action:

- (1) fits within a class of actions listed in Appendix B of 10 CFR 1021, Subpart D (see attached Environmental Checklist);
- (2) does not present any extraordinary circumstances that may affect the significance of the environmental effects of the proposal; and
- (3) has not been segmented to meet the definition of a categorical exclusion.

Based on these determinations, WAPA finds that the proposed action is categorically excluded from further NEPA review.

Signed:

Name: Kristen Dalldorf

Title: Environmental Manager

Attachment: Environmental Checklist

Categorical Exclusion Environmental Checklist

This checklist documents environmental considerations for the proposed project and explains why the project would not have the potential to cause significant impacts on environmentally sensitive resources and would meet other integral elements of the applied categorical exclusion.

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Project Site Description

The project lies within western Fresno County (36.51146° N, 120.50010° W) near Tower 48-3. Existing habitat consists of grazed pasture and grasslands in the foothills of the Coast Range. Existing land use is predominantly cattle ranching and land ownership is private.

The existing road is an established lightly traveled ranch and utility right-of-way (ROW) road.

Evaluation of Potential Impacts to Environmental Resources

**Environmental Resource
Impacts**

**No Potential for
Significance**

**No Potential for Significance,
with Conditions**

1. Historic and Cultural Resources

Explanation:

Through past adequate surveys, no known archaeological resources are within the proposed area of potential effect (APE); however, Path 15 is a sensitive area for paleontological resources. If cultural or paleontological resources are identified during implementation, halt work within a 50-foot buffer of the discovery and contact the Contracting Officer Representatives (COR) immediately.

2. Geology and Soils

Explanation:

During grading/roadwork, any disturbed soils would be redistributed within the roadway. At erosion sites, equipment will be used to eliminate void space caused by rills and gullies. Redistributed soil will be compacted and stabilized to build up the road foundation.

3. Plants

(including Federal/state special-status species and habitats)

Explanation:

The project area is considered within the range of San Joaquin woolly-threads (*Monolopia congdonii*). Based on survey results and proposed avoidance measures, WAPA biologists made a "no effect" determination for the species.

Lost Hills crownscale (*Atriplex coronata* var. *vallicola*) does not have formal state status but is considered in CEQA. This plant occurs in disturbed areas with alkaline soils and has been detected in the project vicinity. It is expected to persist after roadwork because of the plant's ruderal nature.

Off road travel will be avoided. Soils will be preserved, redistributed and recontoured onsite. Follow all project avoidance measures.

4. Wildlife

(including Federal/state special-status species and habitats)

Explanation:

Habitat assessment and surveys for blunt-nosed leopard lizard (BNLL), giant kangaroo rat (GKR), San Joaquin kit fox (SJKF), and burrowing owl (BUOW) were performed by a qualified biologist. None of these species was detected within the survey buffer of the work.

Based on the survey results and proposed avoidance measures, WAPA biologists made a "no effect" determination for the listed species.

Project activities will only occur during daytime hours. Workers will be provided project-specific environmental awareness training and resources will be clearly marked with no-work buffers. Off road travel will be avoided. Soils will be preserved, redistributed and recontoured onsite. A biological monitor will be on-site for any activities within suitable habitats for listed species. Follow all project avoidance measures.

5. Water Bodies, Floodplains, and Fish

(including Federal/state special-status species, ESUs, and habitats)

Explanation:

The project area and adjacent areas do not have any water bodies, floodplains, or fish; therefore no impacts would occur.

6. Wetlands

Explanation:

The project area does not have wetlands; therefore, no anticipated impacts would occur.

7. Groundwater and Aquifers

Explanation:

The project area does not support any groundwater dependent ecosystems.
No drilling would occur and no pumping or replenishment of groundwater would occur.
Spill prevention measures would be utilized during construction activities.
The project would not provide a pathway for surface water or groundwater contamination.

8. Land Use and Specially-Designated Areas

Explanation:

The land use would not change at the project site. Nor is the project within, or near, any specially designated areas, such as National Scenic Rivers.

9. Visual Quality

Explanation:

The visual quality would be consistent with the existing use of the transmission right-of-way corridor and access roads. There would be no significant change to the visual quality.

10. Air Quality

Explanation:

Federal law requires the protection of air quality under the Clean Air Act. All activities on this project shall be compliant with Federal, State, and local regulations. In particular, California Air Resources Board regulations apply to diesel equipment and trucks as well as fleets of large spark ignition equipment.

Also, the project is located within the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District jurisdiction and is subject to the local rules from that agency. In particular, rule VIII pertains to PM10 pollution (dust) from construction and excavation activities, paved and unpaved roads. In addition, standard operating procedures (SPO) will be followed regarding the operation of machinery, vehicles, and dust control.

The following relevant SOPs were adopted by WAPA to support the state implementation plan to restore air quality in the region:

AQ-SOP-1: The Contractor will adhere to all applicable requirements of those agencies having jurisdiction over air quality matters, and any necessary permits for O&M will be obtained.

AQ-SOP-2: Machinery and vehicles will be kept in good operating condition and older equipment will be replaced with equipment meeting applicable emission standards; appropriate emissions-control equipment will be maintained for vehicles and equipment, per Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and/or WAPA air-emission requirements.

AQ-SOP-3: Idle equipment will be shut down when not in active use; visible emissions from stationary generators will be controlled.

AQ-SOP-7: Major operations will be avoided on days when the local Air Quality Index is expected to exceed 150.

11. Noise

Explanation:

There are no residences within several miles of the project location. Construction noise would be temporary and would occur during daylight hours. Operational noise would not change.

12. Human Health and Safety

Explanation:

During project activities, all standard safety protocols would be followed. Project activities do not anticipate impacts to human health or safety.

Evaluation of Other Integral Elements

The proposed project would also meet conditions that are integral elements of the categorical exclusion. The project would not:

Threaten a violation of applicable statutory, regulatory, or permit requirements for environment, safety, and health, or similar requirements of DOE or Executive Orders.

Explanation, if necessary:

None provided

Require siting and construction or major expansion of waste storage, disposal, recovery, or treatment facilities (including incinerators) that are not otherwise categorically excluded.

Explanation, if necessary:

None provided

Disturb hazardous substances, pollutants, contaminants, or CERCLA excluded petroleum and natural gas products that preexist in the environment such that there would be uncontrolled or unpermitted releases.

Explanation, if necessary:

None provided

Involve genetically engineered organisms, synthetic biology, governmentally designated noxious weeds, or invasive species, unless the proposed activity would be contained or confined in a manner designed and operated to prevent unauthorized release into the environment and conducted in accordance with applicable requirements, such as those of the Department of Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the National Institutes of Health.

Explanation, if necessary:

None provided

Landowner Notification, Involvement, or Coordination

Description:

WAPA will work closely with the landowners to provide adequate notification of project activities.

Based on the foregoing, this proposed project does not have the potential to cause significant impacts to any environmentally sensitive resource.

Signed:

Name: Kristen Dalldorf

Title: Environmental Manager