

RADIO SYSTEM UPGRADES AT WILLOW CREEK SUMMIT AND WINDY DEVIL ANNEX

Final Environmental Assessment

Bonneville Power Administration

US Bureau of Land Management

DOE/EA-2092 and DOI-BLM-ID-I030-2020-0009-EA

October 2021

This document is the Final Environmental Assessment (EA) for the proposed Radio System Upgrades at Willow Creek Summit and Windy Devil Annex Project (the “Project”). Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) prepared this document as an abbreviated Final EA because there have been no substantial changes to the Proposed Action, No Action Alternative, or environmental analysis presented in the Draft EA. This abbreviated Final EA provides changes made to the text of the Draft EA, as well as comments received on the Draft EA and BPA’s responses to those comments. This Final EA should be used as a companion document to the Draft EA (DOE/EA-2092 and DOI-BLM-ID-I030-2020-0009-EA, dated June 2021), which contains the full text describing the Project, its potential environmental impacts, and mitigation measures to reduce impacts. The Draft EA is available on the Project webpage at: www.bpa.gov/goto/WillowCreekWindyDevil.

Summary

BPA proposes to upgrade its communication system by implementation of the Project in Custer County, Idaho. Specifically, BPA proposes to construct two communication stations on public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management Challis Field Office and the U.S. Forest Service Salmon-Challis National Forest Lost River Ranger District.

BPA is proposing the construction of the new stations to improve the reliability and integrity of the very high frequency (VHF) radio system for BPA mobile radio users in the vicinity of BPA transmission lines in BPA’s Idaho Falls Radio Region. The Project would involve reconstructing and grading existing roads, extending existing alternating current power lines, and developing the communication stations that would include equipment buildings, lattice steel antenna towers, and propane tanks.

BPA released the Draft EA for public comment on June 24, 2021; the comment period was open until July 23, 2021. The Draft EA describes the project, its potential environmental impacts, and mitigation measures to reduce those impacts. BPA notified potentially interested and affected persons, agencies, Tribes, and organizations regarding the availability of the Draft EA, as well as how to request a copy. For further information regarding the comment period and comments received, see the section titled “**Comments Received on Draft EA and BPA’s Responses**” in this document.

Changes to the Draft EA

Changes made to the draft EA include the addition of clarifying language. These revisions are presented below by the chapter and section in which they appear in the Draft EA. New text is underlined and highlighted in blue.

Appendix D Best Management Practices, Design Features and Mitigation Measures

Design Features and Mitigation Measures Specific to Willow Creek Summit

Greater Sage Grouse PHMA Compensatory Mitigation

The following bullet has been added to page D-1:

- The compensatory mitigation of riparian planting would directly improve 0.5 acres of sage grouse late-brood-rearing habitat which is the most limiting of habitat types on the landscape. Overall, the riparian planting as part of the larger BLM habitat improvement project that would improve 4.5 acres of late-brood rearing habitat, including 700 feet of the Pahsimeroi River and adjacent riparian and sagebrush steppe. The current habitat condition is poor, lacking forbs and other plants that provide forage to sage grouse during the dry summer season.

Vegetation

The following two bullets have been added to page D-2:

- Revegetation of disturbed areas would use a BLM seed mix that includes multiple pollinator-friendly forbs.
- All spraying of noxious weeds would be conducted using spot spraying methods that would limit the exposure of pollinators to herbicides. No insecticides or pesticides would be used.

The following bullet on page D-2 has been revised as follows:

- Monitor project construction areas for noxious weed and invasive species for at least 3 years, unless control is achieved earlier. Following the recording and/or consultation with the BLM, BPA and CTCI would be responsible for weed treatment within the area specified. All treatments would adhere to federal guidelines and regulations and ensure that BLM-approved chemicals are used.

Wildlife

The following bullets has been added to page D-1:

- Perform construction activities at WCS after the end of sage grouse nesting season, July 15 or later.

Design Features and Mitigation Measures Specific to Windy Devil Annex

Vegetation

The following bullet has been added to page D-3:

- Avoid Welsh's buckwheat in trenching for the power conduit burial from the transformer at the existing Windy Devil Communications Site to the new Windy Devil Annex site. Contact USFS for identification of route.

The following bullet on page D-3 has been revised as follows:

- Do not grade the access road to the north of Windy Devil Annex construction because this would eliminate the Welsh's buckwheat individuals in the road bed and put those on road edges at risk.

Design Features and Mitigation Measures Common for Both Willow Creek Summit and Windy Devil Annex

Vegetation

The following bullet on page D-4 has been revised as follows:

- Seed disturbed areas with certified seed of native species in the late fall (preferred, as conditions allow) to deter erosion and curtail the introductions of weeds. Obtain BLM/USFS staff approval for any seed mixture and dispersal method prior to purchase and implementation.

Wildlife

The first bullet has been revised as follows:

- Conduct brush removal, tree trimming, grading, and any other ground-disturbing activities for construction and maintenance outside of the primary bird nesting season to the extent possible. For threatened, endangered, and sensitive (TES) species identified in this EA, the primary nesting season begins as early as March 7 (burrowing owl) and extends through August 15 (ferruginous hawk and golden eagle) (BLM 2020). If construction activities must occur during the primary bird nesting season, a nest clearance survey should be scheduled within 10 days prior to the planned disturbance if appropriate. If an active nest is identified before or during construction, coordinate with appropriate personnel at Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) and/or US Fish and Wildlife to determine measures to avoid or minimize impacts on the nesting bird.

The seventh bullet has been removed because it is redundant to the first bullet that also further clarifies restrictions:

- ~~• Schedule construction and maintenance activities around the nesting and activity schedule of protected birds~~

Visual Resources

To remove redundancy and conflicting information, the following changes have been made, page D-5:

The first bullet has been removed:

- ~~• Colors of the equipment shelter including the roof must be consistent with the surrounding area and the communications site plan and must be approved in advance by the BLM and the USFS.~~

The third bullet has been revised to:

- Paint the Windy Devil Annex buildings a color to blend in with the background landform, dark gray to green, or as instructed by USFS.

Other

A new item has been added:

- At Willow Creek Summit and Windy Devil Annex, where no specific directives are included for station design, construction, and site restoration, the current BLM Willow Creek Summit Communications Site Plan, and USFS Windy Devil Communications Site Management Plan are to be referenced as the guidance documentation.

Comments Received on Draft EA and BPA’s Responses

To solicit comments on the Draft EA, it was posted to BPA’s project website and to the BLM ePlanning webpage. The comment period ran from June 24, 2021 to July 23, 2021, and one comment letter was received. The comment letter and associated author and affiliation are summarized below. The comments contained in the letter are reproduced, with the response to each letter’s comments immediately following.

Comment Number	Commenter
TEPCSB21 0005	Edmondson, Idaho Office of Species Conservation, in cooperation with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game

Comment [TEPCSB21 0005](#): Idaho Office of Species Conservation and Idaho Department of Fish and Game

0005-1 BPA should better describe how the beneficial compensatory mitigation will offset the 0.5 acre debit impact projected by the HQT and meet the net gain standard in the BLM’s Sage-Grouse ARMPA. It is understood by the descriptions in Appendices B and D that riparian plants and vegetation planting materials will be purchased for a BLM habitat improvement project, but it is unclear the dimensions and beneficial impact of the beneficial project to grouse. The amount of acreage that will be improved because of the habitat improvement project should be included to help the public know that the mitigation component is being met.

0005-2 When restoring and revegetating disturbed areas, BPA should incorporate seeding or plantings of native nectar plants and forbs to benefit a wide range of pollinators. The *2021 USDA Annual Strategic Pollinator Priorities and Goals Report* identifies the importance of “optimal planting choices for forage and habitat in agricultural lands, Forest Service Forests, and rangelands to support pollinator health” as well as identifying and enhancing “Integrated Pest Management (IPM) options and Best Management Practices (BMPs) toward mitigating the impacts of environmental stressors (e.g., pesticides) on pollinators” (11). Noxious weed and annual grass control are important factors after disturbance, and the EA should analyze the impact of herbicide and insecticide use on pollinators.

0005-3 When construction activities begin and BPA identifies an active nest during primary bird nesting season, coordination with the appropriate agencies should include applying for a removal permit from IDFG.

Response to Comment [TEPCSB21 0005](#) Idaho Office of Species Conservation and Idaho Department of Fish and Game

0005-1 Appendix D has been updated to reflect that the compensatory mitigation of riparian planting would directly improve 0.5 acres of sage grouse late-brood rearing habitat and the overall riparian planting as part of the larger BLM habitat improvement project would improve 4.5 acres of late-brood rearing habitat.

0005-2 Revegetation of disturbed areas at the Willow Creek Summit site would use a BLM seed mix that includes multiple pollinator friendly forbs including western yarrow, lupine, and spiny phlox, or similar forbs depending on seed availability.

Post-project noxious weed herbicide treatments are only proposed for the Willow Creek site. All spraying of noxious weeds at Willow Creek would be conducted using BLM-approved herbicides and would use spot spraying methods that would limit the exposure of pollinators to herbicides. No insecticides or pesticides would be used.

0005-3 Based on the construction timing and pre-construction nest surveys, BPA does not anticipate directly impacting active bird nests. If an active bird nest is identified during construction activities, BPA would coordinate with IDFG to avoid or minimize impacts to the nesting birds.

BONNEVILLE POWER ADMINISTRATION
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