

# Categorical Exclusion Determination

Western Area Power Administration  
Department of Energy



**Proposed Action:** 2023 Path 15 500-kV Transmission Line Access Road Erosion Repair

**Project No.:** 100388840

**Project Manager:** Ricardo Velarde

**Location:** Western Fresno and Merced Counties, 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 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.

The access roads and structures associated with the Path 15 line are highly susceptible to erosion due to the nature of the substrate. The proposed project includes grading and minor repairs (e.g., culvert cleanouts, rolling dip construction) along selected access roads, totaling 11 miles, of the Path 15 transmission line, as well as five isolated repair sites outside of this 11 mile area. WAPA's erosion repair and routine road maintenance activities utilize best management practices for soil stabilization and runoff control.

In 2023 (and possibly 2024), WAPA proposes to repair erosion damage at selected access roads in western Fresno County between Towers 50-1 and 57-1. Isolated repair sites are proposed near towers 12-4 (two sites), 46-1, 47-2, and 47-3. Project involves grading of up to 11 miles of existing dirt access roads, as well as cleaning out and stabilizing culverts and constructing rolling dips and leadoffs to prevent further erosion. The five isolated repair sites involve excavation of the road surface down to a solid substrate and reconstruction of the roadbed. Work is primarily on existing roadways, though staging areas may be adjacent to the roadway, and the excavation sites may require local maneuvers off the roadway. WAPA estimates areas of temporary impacts to involve 2.417 acres throughout the project, much of this being temporary staging/parking areas. Typical equipment for the project includes one road grader, one vibratory roller, one small tractor with front-end loader and box grader attachment, and one water truck. The project will require up to three weeks total and may be completed in pieces as schedule allows. No permanent impacts are expected.

**Findings:**

In accordance with Section 1021.410(b) of the Department of Energy's (DOE) National Environmental Policy Act (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.

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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 the Ortigalita Peak NW, Monocline Ridge, and Lillis Ranch USGS quads in western Merced and Fresno Counties. 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.

Existing roads are established lightly traveled ranch and utility ROW roads. Work is primarily on existing roadways, though staging areas may be adjacent to the roadway, and the excavation sites may require local maneuvers off the roadway. In places where this is not possible (e.g., equipment would block the entire shared access road), staging areas will be selected in cooperation with a biological monitor to minimize potential effects on sensitive species.

## 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:**

Archaeological and paleontological surveys were conducted in 2003, prior to the construction of Path 15 for the entire ROW and access roads. Additional archaeological surveys were conducted in 2011 on the ROW and access roads to cover O&M activities. No cultural resource sites are located in the erosion repair access road areas. There are, however, known sites in and around other access roads and possibly outside of the right-of-way. The Path 15 area is sensitive for paleontological resources. Should any skeletal remains (human or otherwise) or fossil materials be uncovered during construction activities, all work is to stop at once in the immediate area, and the Contractor shall notify the COR immediately.

Mitigation required:

- Include in WAPA's annual report
- SNR Environmental will be contacted immediately if archaeological, paleontological, or historic evidence is found.

**2. Geology and Soils**



**Explanation:**

During grading/roadwork, any disturbed soils would be redistributed within the roadway, which will be compacted and stabilized. Severe erosion sites near towers 12/4, 46/1, 47/2, and 47/3 will require local excavation and reconstruction of the roadbed. At these sites, excavators will be used to dig down to sufficient depth to eliminate void space and re-establish a solid road base. Excavated soil will be redistributed and compacted to build up the road foundation.

**3. Plants (including Federal/state special-status species and habitats)**



**Explanation:**

Most of the project falls within the range of San Joaquin woolly-threads. There are no known Federal listed plants at the project locations, and the project areas are poor quality habitat (high cover of non-native grasses).

WAPA has reached a determination that the project is "not likely to adversely affect" the listed species and is currently in consultation with the USFWS regarding the project. A letter of concurrence with WAPA's determination is expected soon. Conservation measures include redistribution of soils on site, ensuring that propagules, if present, remain on site.

**4. Wildlife (including Federal/state special-status species and habitats)**



**Explanation:**

Protocol-level and reconnaissance surveys for several special-status species, including blunt-nosed leopard lizard (BNLL), giant kangaroo rat (GKR), San Joaquin kit fox (SJKF), California red-legged frog (CRLF), and burrowing owl have been conducted. None of these species have been detected.

Based on the survey results and the habitat quality, WAPA has reached a determination that the project is "not likely to adversely affect" the listed species and is currently in consultation with the USFWS regarding the project. A letter of concurrence with WAPA's determination is expected soon. Conservation measures including pre-construction surveys and on-site biological monitors will ensure that the project will not adversely affect these species.

**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 impacts would occur.

7. **Groundwater and Aquifers**  
**Explanation:**



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 will be followed regarding the operation of machinery and vehicles and dust control.

WAPA has run a theoretical model to show that this maintenance operations project is under the tons per year (tpy) thresholds of significance with respect to air quality, and emissions were estimated according to the table below.

Criteria Pollutant:	ROG	NOx	CO	SOx	PM10	PM2.5
Local Annual Operational threshold (tpy):	10	10	100	27	15	15
Estimated Operational 2022 maintenance (tpy):	0.00	0.04	0.03	0.00	2.94	0.60

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 would not impact 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:



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:



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:



Have the potential to cause significant impacts on environmentally sensitive resources, including, but not limited to, those listed in paragraph B(4) of 10 CFR Part 1021, Subpart D, Appendix B.

Explanation, if necessary:



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:

**Landowner Notification, Involvement, or Coordination**

**Description:**

WAPA would work closely with the landowners to provide adequate notification of construction timing.

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

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