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**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY  
Western Area Power Administration**

**San Joaquin Valley Right-of-Way Maintenance Project**

**Finding of No Significant Impact  
and Floodplain Statement of Findings**

**Summary:** This decision document announces the Western Area Power Administration's (Western) Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for Western's proposal to revise its operation and maintenance (O&M) activities for its existing San Joaquin Valley area electrical transmission line infrastructure, rights-of-way (ROW), substations, a maintenance facility, and access roads. The project area includes portions of San Joaquin, Contra Costa, Alameda, Calaveras, Tuolumne, Santa Clara, and Merced counties. Proposed O&M activities include, but are not limited to, facility inspection/repair, vegetation management, and equipment upgrades. Western is the lead agency under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA); there are no cooperating agencies. Western has determined that the Proposed Action is not a Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment, within the context of NEPA. Therefore, the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required and Western is issuing this FONSI.

Standard Operating Procedures and resource-specific Project Conservation Measures (PCMs) have been incorporated into the Proposed Action to avoid and minimize any potential environmental effects.

Also included is a finding that there is no practicable alternative to performing O&M activities within sections of the 100-year and 500-year floodplains crossed by Western's existing San Joaquin Valley area transmission lines and appurtenant facilities.

**For Copies and Further Information, Contact:** Mr. Ricardo Velarde, Project Manager, Western Area Power Administration, Sierra Nevada Regional Office, 114 Parkshore Drive, Folsom, CA 95630-4710; telephone number: 916.353.4565; email: [Velarde@wapa.gov](mailto:Velarde@wapa.gov)  
The Final EA and FONSI are also available for download at:  
<http://www.wapa.gov/sn/environment/SanJoaquinValleyProject.asp>.

**For General Information on the Department of Energy's NEPA Activities, Contact:** Ms. Carol M. Borgstrom, Director, Office of NEPA Policy and Compliance (EH-42), U.S. Department of Energy, 1000 Independence Avenue SW, Washington DC, 20585; telephone number: (202) 586-4600 or (800) 472-2756.

**Supplemental Information:** Within its Sierra Nevada Region, Western owns, operates, and/or maintains 69-kV and 230-kV transmission lines, a 17.2-kV distribution line, associated substations, and a maintenance facility in San Joaquin, Contra Costa, Alameda, Calaveras, and

Tuolumne counties, and owns and operates additional substations in Santa Clara and Merced counties, California. Western also has legal use of various improved and unimproved access roads to their facilities. The purpose of the Proposed Action is to update the manner in which Western operates and maintains its existing transmission line ROWs and infrastructure, legal access roads, substations, and other facilities in order to ensure system reliability and safe all-weather access to the existing infrastructure while meeting regulatory requirements for the protection of sensitive resources. Western designed this maintenance program to balance environmental protection with system reliability and compliance with the National Electric Safety Code, Western Systems Coordinating Council requirements, North American Electric Reliability Council reliability standards, Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers standards, and Western directives for maintaining system reliability and protection of human safety.

Proposed O&M activities include, but are not limited to, facility inspection/repair (e.g., ground and aerial patrols, replacement of equipment within the confines of the existing fenced substation or facility perimeter, insulator maintenance), vegetation management (e.g., manual control, mechanical control), equipment upgrades (e.g., reconductoring, tower replacement), and access road improvements. O&M activities were divided into three activity categories (Category A, B, and C) based on the level of potential impacts. An analysis of potential environmental effects of activities within each category was presented in the EA and included discussions for biological resources, air quality, cultural resources, paleontological resources, land use, recreation, aesthetics, water resources, geology and soils, public health and safety, noise, traffic and transportation, environmental justice, and intentional destructive acts. Resource-specific Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and Project Conservation Measures (PCMs) were developed to avoid or minimize any potential environmental effects. PCMs are activity constraints (e.g., how or when work will be performed) specified for each activity category to ensure protection of biological, cultural, and paleontological resources over a range of potential maintenance activities.

The No Action Alternative was also analyzed in the EA. The primary differences between the Proposed Action and the No Action Alternative are the broader application of herbicide use, the installation of fiber-optic cable, tower relocation/realignment, installation of cellular equipment on existing infrastructure, and implementation of resource-specific SOPs and PCMs. The Proposed Action also provides a procedure to streamline the regulatory process for future O&M activities.

Other alternatives considered were the Comprehensive Vegetation Removal Alternative and the Prohibition of Herbicide Use Alternative. These, however, were eliminated from full review in the EA due to the potential for adverse effects and the inability to reasonably achieve the project objectives respectively.

Comprehensive biological and cultural surveys of the project area were performed to identify sensitive biological and cultural resources. Sensitive resources have associated PCMs, which must be adhered to by all personnel conducting O&M activities. PCMs are both resource-specific and activity-specific; therefore, they can be combined in a way that is unique to each O&M activity and provide the necessary site-specific protection for sensitive resources.

The Proposed Action would not violate applicable Federal, State, or local laws or requirements imposed for environmental protection. Western reinitiated consultation under Section 7 of the *Endangered Species Act* with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and National Marine Fisheries Service to include the San Joaquin Valley ROW O&M Program to a programmatic informal consultation on the North Area ROW O&M Project. On June 6, 2011, the USFWS concurred, through an amendment to the informal consultation on the North Area ROW O&M Project, to add San Joaquin Valley ROW O&M Program activities to the existing programmatic informal consultation. On October 17, 2011, the National Marine Fisheries Service also concurred, but with additional restrictions placed on activities in or near certain water bodies. Pursuant to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, Western also has a Programmatic Agreement (PA) with the California State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) for existing routine O&M and emergency activities. This PA was executed in 1997 but was revised in 2010 in consultation with the SHPO and ACHP. The 2010 PA supersedes the 1997 PA and reflects all previous and updated O&M and emergency activities along Western's ROWs, including access roads and substations, under this project.

***Floodplain Statement of Findings:*** This is a Floodplain Statement of Findings prepared in accordance with 10 CFR part 1022, and provides a summary and the results of the Floodplain and Wetland Assessment, which is incorporated in the EA.

Western proposes to revise and implement various O&M procedures for its existing San Joaquin Valley electrical transmission line infrastructure, ROWs, communication facilities, and access roads. The existing project area crosses major rivers, including the San Joaquin and Old rivers, and their associated floodplains. The Proposed Action would not result in substantive modifications to the floodplain that would alter the capacity of the floodplain to convey and dissipate the volume and energy of peak flows. The Proposed Action would have no adverse effects on floodplains, flood hazards, or floodplain management because of the incorporation of PCMs that reduce risk factors including, but not limited to, erosion control, buffer distances for stockpiles of soil or discarded vegetation, and minimization of disturbance to riparian and wetland vegetation. The Proposed Action conforms to all applicable State and local floodplain and wetland protection standards to the extent applicable to Federal projects.

Western will not implement the Proposed Action for at least 30 days after publication of this FONSI and Floodplain Statement of Findings.

**Determination:** Based on the information in the EA as summarized here, Western determines that the Proposed Action is not a Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment within the meaning of NEPA (42 U.S.C. §§ 4321-4347); therefore, an EIS is not required and this FONSI is being issued.



Thomas R. Boyko  
Regional Manager  
Western Area Power Administration, Sierra Nevada Region