National Telecommunications and Information Administration
Broadband Technology Opportunities Program
Finding of No Significant Impact
Region 18 Education Service Center, Connect Southwest Texas Project

Summary

Region 18 Education Service Center (Region 18) applied to the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) for a grant to install approximately 195 miles of fiber optic cable, construct three new towers, and upgrade an existing collocated tower. Most of the fiber will be installed underground in existing road and utility rights of way (ROWs). The new network will directly connect 72 community anchor institutions (CAIs) and provide broadband access to the region's last mile and middle mile service providers. The action affects 15 Texas counties and is referred to as the Connect Southwest Texas Project (Project).

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) awarded a grant for the Project to Region 18 through BTOP, as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The funding must be obligated and the Project completed within three years. This timeline will comply with the laws and regulations governing the use of this ARRA grant funding.

BTOP supports the deployment of broadband infrastructure in unserved and underserved areas of the United States and its Territories. As a condition of receiving BTOP grant funding, recipients must comply with all relevant Federal legislation, including the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA). Specifically, NEPA limits the types of actions that the grantee can initiate prior to completing required environmental reviews. Some actions may be categorically excluded from further NEPA analyses based on the specific types and scope of work to be conducted. For projects that are not categorically excluded from further environmental review, the grant recipient must prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) that meets the requirements of NEPA. After a sufficiency review, NTIA may adopt the EA, use it as the basis for finding that the project will not have a significant impact on the environment, and issue a finding of no significant impact (FONSI). Following such a finding, the BTOP grant recipient may then begin construction or other activities identified in the EA as the preferred alternative, in accordance with any special protocols or identified environmental protection measures.

Region 18 completed an EA for this Project in May 2011. NTIA reviewed the EA, determined it is sufficient, and adopted it as part of the development of this FONSI.

The Project includes:

- Installing approximately 180 miles of buried cable using plowing with a ripper attachment, horizontal directional drilling, and open-cut trenching methods;
- Installing approximately 15 miles of cable aerially on existing utility poles;
- Installing two new 50-foot H-frame towers and one 85-foot tower
- Installing an 18-inch microwave dish on an existing 50-foot tower;
- Installing handholes at strategic locations to allow access to the cable; and

- Providing connections from the new network to 72 CAIs.

Based on a review of the analysis in the EA, NTIA has determined that the Project, implemented in accordance with the preferred alternative, and incorporating best management practices (BMPs) and protective measures identified in the EA, will not result in any significant environmental impacts. Therefore, the preparation of an EIS is not required. The basis for this determination is described in this FONSI.

Additional information and copies of the Executive Summary of the EA and FONSI are available to all interested persons and the public through the BTOP website (www2.ntia.doc.gov/) and the following contact:

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Purpose and Need

The purpose of the Project is to provide open-access, middle mile broadband infrastructure to rural, unserved, and underserved areas of Texas. The Project will install fiber optic cable to connect 72 CAIs, including schools (grades K-12), higher education facilities, libraries, healthcare facilities, courthouses, public safety entities, and other government facilities. These institutions currently lack access to broadband services or the existing broadband widths and speeds are not sufficient to meet existing needs. In addition, the middle mile infrastructure will provide connectivity throughout 15 counties, providing opportunities associated with broadband technology to 40,000 households and 8,000 businesses.

Project Description

The proposed broadband network includes a total of 195 miles of fiber optic cable within 15 counties in Texas. Region 18 will install new fiber optic cable within existing roadway and utility ROW and easements to complete the planned network. Approximately 180 miles of cable will be installed underground. In addition to the buried fiber, approximately 15 miles of cable will be hung from existing utility poles. Handholes will be installed and strategically placed in locations along a majority of the route to allow access to the cable for current and future use.

Region 18 will install a majority the buried fiber using a plow with a ripper attachment. The ripper will open a narrow slot, insert the cable into the opening, and cover the cable in one operation. Region 18 will also bury fiber via trenching. The trenching equipment will open a trench, backfill the opening, and compact the ground to restore it to its original condition. Region 18 may also install cable using directional boring. During boring operations, the cable will be pulled into place through the bore leaving only a minimal surface disturbance. The boring rig will directionally drill under roads, river or stream crossings, cultural resources or cemeteries, and other existing infrastructure or resources that require avoidance. Once the bore is constructed, the cable will be pulled into place through the bore. After installation of the encased bore, the fiber will be blown or pulled through the bore. Best management practices will be utilized to filter any water that must be removed from the bore hole before it is released. Region 18 will utilize existing duct already in place for certain sections of the proposed route, and will pull the new fiber through the existing duct. These sections will cause minimal ground disturbance. Hand holes will be placed at strategic locations to allow access to the cable for current and future use.

Region 18 will establish one construction staging area to support this Project. The staging area will be established in Pyote on a leased, fenced, previously disturbed, industrial lot within the city limits. This is the only area outside of the disturbed ROWs that is proposed by the Project. No other staging areas are proposed and no additional ground disturbance will be required.

For aerial construction, a metal strand will be attached to existing poles and cable will be lashed to the strand. It is possible that approximately 10% of the existing poles will need to be replaced. The Project will follow Rural Utilities Service (RUS) guidelines for pole replacement and installation. Any pole improvements or replacements will be only within the previously disturbed ROW. The depth of the new pole installation will vary depending on the parent material in which they are placed, ranging from 5 to 8 feet.

Region 18 will construct three new towers and upgrade one existing tower. Generally, the new towers will be constructed on previously disturbed, self-supporting cell sites measuring 50x50 feet. First the site will be cleared with a bulldozer and leveled, in accordance with the Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP). After the land has been cleared, three foundation footings will be installed, typically 3 to 6 feet wide and 6 to 30 feet deep. The holes are dug with a 3 to 6 foot wide Auger Drill. After the holes have been dug, the hole is filled a rebar cage and sealed with concrete. A 40-inch deep ground ring will be dug around the tower using a small backhoe. This ring will be filled with concrete to make a foundation. The tower steel is delivered to the site unassembled and each 20 foot section is assembled onsite. The Big Bend Marathon Tower and Big Bend Fort Stockton Tower will be constructed using a wooden pole with an adjacent 8-foot stub pole to form an H-frame.

The Big Bend Marathon Tower will be constructed at Marathon High School (Marathon, Brewster County, Texas). The new tower will be a free-standing, non-guyed 50-foot wooden pole with an adjacent 8-foot stub pole, H-frame, to mount EXALT radio equipment and OCCAM

Ethernet transport equipment, measuring 4 feet in diameter. The equipment will use AC power provided through either an existing meter at the school, or a new meter attached to the H-frame. Battery equipment will provide back-up power. The tower will be erected on an existing driveway. Therefore no vegetation will be removed and the site is easily accessible via current access roads.

The Big Bend Fort Stockton Tower will be located southeast of Fort Stockton, Pecos County, Texas, at the existing Big Bend Telephone building on a previously disturbed lot. The new tower will be a free-standing, non-guyed 50-foot wooden pole with an adjacent 8-foot stub pole, H-frame, to mount EXALT radio equipment and OCCAM Ethernet transport equipment, measuring 4 feet in diameter. The equipment will use AC power provided through either an existing meter at the school, or a new meter attached to the H-frame. Battery equipment will provide back-up power. The tower will be erected on an existing paved surface; therefore, no vegetation will be removed as all activity will occur on previously disturbed ground.

The Dell Telephone Jobe Halamicek Ranch Tower will be installed at the Halamicek Ranch in northern Reeves County, Texas. The tower will be installed near existing ranch buildings within a previously disturbed area. Dell Telephone is arranging an easement with the landowner to place the tower on this privately owned property. The tower will be a free standing, unlit 85-foot metal monopole mounted with EXALT radio equipment and OCCAM Ethernet transport equipment. Region 18 will also attach a 3-foot diameter satellite dish antenna on the new tower. The site will be accessed through an easement on existing roadways. An AC meter will be connected to existing power lines to provide power, and a solar unit will provide backup power. No fencing will be constructed as the tower will be placed adjacent to an existing barn.

Region 18 will install equipment on the Dell Telephone Mentone Tower, an existing, 50-foot, free standing metal monopole tower. The tower is located adjacent to the Loving County courthouse in Mentone, Loving County, Texas; the Loving County courthouse is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. An 18-inch DS3 radio panel antenna disk will be placed on the tower 35 feet from the ground surface. The primary source of power will be AC electricity and a DC solar panel will provide backup power.

Last mile connections to the CAIs will be a buried fiber drop to the anchor institution that will follow existing disturbance corridors. Typically, a new handhole will be installed outside the CAI and a fiber drop will be bored from a pedestal or handhole on the buried cable route to the new handhole at the CAI. Then two, four-inch conduit sweeps will be installed inside the new handhole at the anchor institution. The four-inch sweeps will be extended to a new outside metal wall box on the anchor institution wall. The conduit will then be extended and terminated, by the core drilling method, inside the anchor institution wall and pushed through the new conduit entrance. Region 18 will install the conduit in accordance with either the National Electrical Safety Code (NESC) and the National Electrical Code (NEC), or local regulations. The more stringent regulations shall govern installation procedures.

Alternatives

The EA includes an analysis of the alternatives for implementing the Project to meet the purpose and need. NTIA also requires that an EA include a discussion of the no action alternative. The following summarizes the alternatives analyzed in the EA.

Hybrid Underground and Aerial Fiber Network Installation (Preferred Alternative). This effort will install 180 miles of new buried fiber and 15 miles of new aerial fiber; erect three new telecommunication towers; and upgrade one tower. The new network will be run to directly connect to 72 CAIs.

No Action Alternative. No action was also considered. This alternative represents conditions as they currently exist in the Project area. Under the no action alternative, the proposed broadband infrastructure would not be constructed, and most of the Project area would remain underserved. Sections of the network would remain susceptible to disruption of services if something malfunctioned (i.e., the ring design would not be completed). The EA examined this alternative as the baseline for evaluating impacts relative to other alternatives being considered.

Alternatives Considered But Not Carried Forward. Additional alternatives that would meet the purpose and need of this Project were also evaluated. Alternative routes were assessed, with the final planned routes preferred based on the need for broadband services, cost, distance, availability of existing roadway ROW or utility easements, and ease of construction. An all-aerial network was considered but eliminated from further consideration due to the lack of existing aerial lines available for use in the 15 counties of the Project; this alternative would also increase the total cost of the Project. Region 18 also considered an all-underground network. However, due to construction timelines and environmental disturbances, this alternative was eliminated from further consideration. An all-wireless telecommunications network was also considered, but Region 18 determined this alternative was not viable alternative due to permitting requirements and overall infrastructure costs.

Findings and Conclusions

The EA analyzed existing conditions and environmental consequences of the preferred alternative and the no action alternative in 11 major resource areas, including Noise, Air Quality, Geology and Soils, Water Resources, Biological Resources, Historic and Cultural Resources, Aesthetic and Visual Resources, Land Use and Recreation, Infrastructure, Socioeconomic Resources, and Human Health and Safety. Cumulative impacts were also evaluated.

Noise

The Project will generate noise during construction and operation phases. Construction of the network requires the use of heavy machinery such as plows, directional drilling, trenching equipment, small excavators, and bucket trucks. However, noise associated with construction

equipment will be localized and limited to brief periods along any particular section of the Project route. Construction will occur during daylight hours and Region 18 will equip the construction vehicles with mufflers to minimize the noise. Noise associated with maintenance of the network will be similar to existing noise conditions for utility maintenance. Noise from backup power generators at the new tower sites will be low and intermittent, including periodic testing of the equipment. Based on these assessments, no significant noise impacts are expected to occur as a result of this Project.

Air Quality

This Project requires the use of construction equipment and, thus, will result in emissions of ozone precursors and other air pollutants. Because plowing, trenching, directional drilling, and aerial fiber installation techniques result in only minor disturbance of the ground surface, fiber optic cable installation will generate negligible fugitive dust emissions. BMPs, such as dust suppression techniques, sprinkling, covering loaded trucks, and other dust abatement controls will be implemented to control fugitive dust during the construction phase of the Project. Additionally, all construction equipment and vehicles will be maintained in good operating condition to minimize exhaust emissions. Operation of the fiber optic network will require occasional use of backup generators, vehicles, and maintenance/repair equipment. Additional air pollutant emissions generated during the network's operational lifetime are not expected to be significant.

The Project will constitute a short-term minor increase in the use of fossil fuel and associated greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions during construction. It is estimated that this Project will result in the release of approximately 2,598.15 metric tons equivalent of carbon dioxide emissions. This estimate is well below the Council on Environmental Quality's presumptive effects threshold of 25,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent emission from an action.

Based on these assessments, no significant impacts to air quality are expected to result from this Project.

Geology and Soils

Vibratory plowing is the primary underground installation technique for this Project. Compared to open-trenching, this method of cable installation minimizes ground disturbance and maintains the in-situ soil profile. Directional boring will be used to cross wetlands, rivers, roadways, or urban areas. This method requires no surface disruption of sensitive areas, but will result in soil disturbance at the drill insertion point and extraction pits. After fiber installation, all excavated areas will be backfilled with the excavated soil and rock, and graded to match existing topography. The topsoil will be replaced, and appropriate erosion control procedures will be implemented, such as developing a stormwater pollution prevention plan (SWPPP), and installing, monitoring, and maintaining erosion and sedimentation control BMPs. Replacement of existing utility poles will require excavation of an approximately 5- to 8-foot deep hole, placement of the new pole in the hole, removal and disposal of the old pole, and backfilling the old hole with materials excavated from the new hole. All work for the fiber optic cable will

occur within existing, previously disturbed road ROWs, or existing utility easements. Small excavators will be used at the three tower sites to grade an area of approximately 50 x 50 feet. This grading will disturb the near surface soils to create a buildable parcel. Proper erosion control methods will be used to keep the soil from migrating off-site. Based on these assessments, the Project is not expected to result in significant impacts on geology or soils.

Water Resources

The planned Project route crosses at least 55 streams and rivers, wetlands, and floodplains, including one 303(d) impaired water, the Upper Pecos River. Region 18 will use horizontal directional boring or hang the fiber optic line on an existing bridge or crossing structure to avoid potential impacts to streams and rivers and any adjacent wetlands. Typically, directional boring drills 10-feet below river beds, however, the bore depth may vary depending upon environmental conditions. At the Pecos River crossings, a 10-foot deep encased bore will be used to avoid the shallow groundwater in the area. In addition, access pits will be located outside of adjacent wetland areas. Best management practices for surface waters and wetlands will be implemented, such as perimeter silt fences, stabilized construction entrances, earth and/or rock berms, slope stabilization, permanent erosion controls, and site restoration.

An assessment of water resources and discussion of the avoidance procedures for each of the company projects was submitted to the USACE Fort Worth district office between November 2010 and January 2011. In a letter dated February 10, 2011, the USACE Fort Worth district office confirmed that no Section 404 authorization is necessary as the Project will not impact waters of the U.S. within their service area.

The Texas Government Land Office (TGLO) has authority over the riverbeds in Texas due to the Texas Natural Resources Code. Region 18 contacted TGLO and notified them of all river crossings along the Project route. However, the TGLO only claims responsibility of the crossings of the Pecos River between Ward and Pecos Counties. For the Pecos River crossings, Region 18 will need to obtain a TGLO permit for easement over this land.

Limited groundwater disturbance is anticipated during the fiber optic line installation. In the Pecos River Valley, depths to groundwater are 10 to 20 feet from the surface, increasing about 50 feet away from the river. During the boring activities in the areas adjacent to the Pecos River, an encased bore will be utilized in order to minimize and avoid impacts to the ground water. Small amounts of groundwater may be encountered in the bore hole during installation of the encased bore. Best management practices will be implemented to filter any water that must be removed from the bore hole before it is released.

Based on these considerations, and through implementation of appropriate construction methods and BMPs, the Project is not expected to have significant impacts on water resources in the region.

Biological Resources

On May 10, 2011, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Austin District, concurred with NTIA's "no effect" determination for this Project regarding threatened and endangered species in the Austin District's jurisdiction.

The majority of fiber optic cable will be installed underground within existing highway ROW in urban and rural areas. Impacts to species that may inhabit ROW vegetation will not be significant and will only take place during construction. To avoid aquatic species habitat, cable will be bored or hung from existing crossing structure when crossing rivers and waterbodies. Noise and human activity associated with fiber installation are expected to disturb some wildlife species, but these effects will be minor and temporary, occurring during construction only.

Region 18 consulted with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) between November 2010 and January 2011 requesting confirmation of a "no effect" determination to state-listed threatened and endangered species for the Project. Region 18 received written confirmation and "no effect" concurrence from TPWD in a series of letters between January and May 2011. Based on coordination with TPWD, the following BMPs will be implemented as practicable, to minimize impacts on migratory birds:

- Vegetation clearing activities and construction noise during the general bird season of March to August will be minimized, as practicable;
- The project area may be reviewed for active nests prior to construction;
- If prairie dog towns will be disturbed during construction of the project, review of the project area for western burrowing owls will be conducted as necessary. Efforts to avoid any identified nesting owls will be made until the young have fledged.

Based on coordination with TPWD, the following best management practices will be implemented, as practicable, to minimize impacts on state-listed threatened and endangered species:

- A list of state-listed rare, threatened, and endangered species will be provided to construction crews who will be instructed to avoid harm to these species;
- Project construction will generally be located within previously disturbed areas to avoid impacts to natural areas that may contain habitat for state-listed threatened and endangered species;
- Surveys for state-listed rare, threatened, and endangered species and their habitat may be conducted prior to construction, as practicable, if construction will be located in previously undisturbed areas;
- If Harvester ant nests are identified during construction of the project, review of the project area for Texas horned lizard may be conducted. Fact sheets regarding this species will be provided to construction crews.
- Tree trimming and brush clearing will be minimized, to the extent practicable, to avoid impacts to rare plant communities. Revegetation will be completed in compliance with

the Executive Memorandum on Beneficial Landscaping and Executive Order on Invasive Species (EO 13112).

Region 18 will follow USFWS guidance for wireless tower site selection, construction, and operation of communications towers to be constructed less than 200 feet above ground level (AGL). Region 18's proposed towers are 50 to 85 feet AGL, will not use guy wires, and will be monopoles. The towers will be unlit and not adjacent to wetlands, known bird concentration areas, in known migratory or daily movement flyways, or in habitat of threatened or endangered species. Several bat species, including cave myotis bat (*Myotis velifer*), fringed myotis bat (*Myotis thysanodes*), and Mexican free-tail bat (*Tadarida brasiliensis*) are known to occur in Loving, Brewster, and Pecos Counties. USFWS does not currently have guidance regarding bat mortality avoidance at communication towers. However, the minimal stature and lighting avoidance of the tower structures is not anticipated to disorient bats during flight. There are no known bat roosts located adjacent to or within the vicinity of the tower sites.

By limiting ground disturbance and vegetation removal, and by implementing appropriate BMPs, the Project will not adversely impact Federal- or State-listed threatened or endangered species, and therefore, will have no significant adverse impacts on biological resources.

Historic and Cultural Resources

In a letter dated October 14, 2010, NTIA initiated consultation with the Texas State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) on behalf of Region 18. NTIA included a Project description and map with the initial letter to the SHPO.

ACI Consulting, on behalf of the recipient, sent a letter to the SHPO on March 22, 2011, providing information on six archaeological sites, four cemeteries, ten architectural resources and two historic districts in the project vicinity. The letter indicated that these properties were outside the Area of Potential Effects, and sought concurrence on a finding of "no historic properties affected." ACI subsequently sent the SHPO an addendum providing more details about the Mentone Tower and Loving County Courthouse on April 25, 2011.

A letter of concurrence that the project should have No Adverse Effect on Historic Properties was received from the SHPO on April 29, 2011. The letter indicated that all of the buried construction must be restricted to the highway ROW and concurred with the avoidance of two sites (41PC27 and 41PC30 in Pecos County, Texas). The SHPO indicated that should a buried line be taken across open country, an archaeological survey would be necessary to determine that no sites are present along the open country route.

The SHPO also expressed concern associated with the proposed Dell Telephone tower, which is located adjacent to the National Register listed Loving County Courthouse. In a follow-up letter (May 27, 2010), ACI clarified that the project will install an 18-inch disk antenna on the tower at 35 feet. Because the tower is not attached to the roof of the building, and the Project will only install equipment on the tower, the SHPO concurred that no historic properties will be affected.

However, should any equipment or weight be added to the courthouse roof, additional review will be necessary for both Section 106 and the State courthouse statute, which is regulated under Texas Government Code Section 442.008. No National Register Properties or archaeological sites are located within one mile of the three other proposed towers.

On October 14, 2010, NTIA notified seven Native American Tribes and nations of the Project through the Tower Construction Notification System (TCNS). Of these Tribes, two expressed no objection to the Project. Both tribes requested that if any human skeletal remains or any protected Native objects are uncovered during construction, construction should stop immediately, and state and tribal representatives should be contacted. On May 3, 2011, the Delaware Nation requested more information about the project. In response, Region 18 provided more information including a map, route descriptions, and construction techniques to the tribe. To date, the Delaware Nation has not provided further response. The remaining four tribes have not responded.

If Project construction activities uncover cultural materials (e.g., structural remains, historic artifacts, or prehistoric artifacts), Region 18 will stop all construction work and will immediately notify interested Tribes, Nations, the SHPO, and NTIA. If earth-disturbing activities uncover human remains, all work will cease immediately, in accordance with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA) and relevant State statutes. The area around the discovery will be secured and appropriate law enforcement personnel and NTIA will be notified immediately.

Based on completed cultural resources reviews and consultations, the Project is not expected to have significant impacts on historic or cultural resources.

Aesthetic and Visual Resources

The Project will involve construction within a number of different surroundings including rural roadways adjacent to agricultural fields, natural areas, urban streetscapes, and commercial districts. All new cable will be placed within existing ROWs or easements. In general, aesthetic disruptions for most areas will be limited to the duration of construction and primarily in the form of the short-term presence of construction equipment. Because cable will be placed on existing utility poles with existing wires, the additional cable is expected to blend into the visual landscape and will not adversely impact area aesthetics. The disturbance area at each of the three new tower sites, ranging from 50 to 85 feet tall, will be 50 x 50-feet. No historic bridges have been identified along the route. If bridge attachments are used in lieu of boring, these attachments will not be visible. To complete the Dell Telephone Mentone wireless link, an 18-inch dish will be attached to an existing tower adjacent to the NRHP listed Loving County courthouse. Due to the relatively small diameter of the dish, the aesthetic impacts will be minimal. The other three proposed towers will also have minimal impacts on aesthetic resources surrounding the towers due to the existing structures (i.e. high school, Big Bend Telephone building, and farm structures), Region 18 has not yet determined whether a portion of the fiber will be aerial or bored under the Pecos River (the route runs parallel to the river). If the route is

aerial, fiber will be attached to existing poles. If the fiber is bored, it will have a short-term visual impact during the time of construction, but no long term impact on river views. Based on these assessments, this Project will have no significant impacts on aesthetic or visual resources.

Land Use

The infrastructure necessary to complete this Project will be installed within existing roadway ROWs and existing utility easements. These improvements are consistent with normal uses of ROWs and easements. Much of the new fiber will be installed in urban and rural settings. Land use along the proposed route includes mostly residential, commercial, agricultural, and community facilities. The Dell Telephone Jobe Halamicek Ranch tower will be installed on private land at the Halamicek Ranch in northern Reeves County, TX. Dell Telephone is arranging an easement with the landowner to construct the tower. Overall, the construction of the tower will not significantly alter the current land use. The other two towers will be installed in previously disturbed areas, specifically in the Big Bend Telephone building lot, and at the Marathon High School, Marathon, TX. The addition of these towers will not change the current land use. In addition, Davis Mountain State Park, managed by TPWD, intersects one of the route alignments. The alignment within the park will be installed on existing aerial lines and no new ground disturbance is required. Region 18 received notice approving use of the State Park's ROW in email correspondence dated May 3, 2011. Based on these provisions, the Project will have no significant impact on land uses.

Infrastructure

Fiber optic cable will be installed underground and on existing utility poles in a manner that will not damage existing utilities. Electric power service is not expected to be disrupted during construction of the Project. The three new tower sites will use AC power from an existing meter connected to existing building/structures; battery equipment will provide back-up power. No new access roads will be needed at the tower locations because existing access roads, driveways, and parking lots will be used. Project construction activities will not interrupt the traffic flow along the Project route. Based on these assessments, the Project is not expected to have significant impacts on infrastructure, and by providing equipment and connections to enable enhanced internet connectivity, this Project is expected to have a positive overall impact on infrastructure in Texas.

Socioeconomic Resources

This Project will allow rural residents, businesses, and institutions in Texas to access high-speed internet, communications, and other broadband applications. The Project will have positive direct and indirect economic benefits. Region 18 estimates that the Project will create 229 job-years of employment, including direct opportunities in the engineering, construction, and fiber optic supply industries. Indirect economic benefits include new jobs for last-mile providers; new jobs for rural industries that need broadband infrastructure to remain competitive; enhanced opportunities for telecommuting and online collaboration; and educational opportunities via online education and connected classrooms. Overall, the Project will have a positive impact on

socioeconomic resources in the region, and is not expected to result in significant impacts on socioeconomic resources.

Human Health and Safety

Because the proposed fiber optic line will be installed in existing road ROW, there is some danger to construction workers and/or motorists during the installation process. However, all workers will follow Occupation Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) practices and will conform to Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) and other applicable municipal requirements for road safety. These requirements will include traffic control plans with signage and flaggers, requirements for personal protective equipment, such as safety vests and helmets, heavy machinery training, and access to first-aid and hazardous materials collection equipment. Since the Project will use existing road and utility ROWs, delays to motorists are expected to be minimal. Work within urban areas shall maintain safe pedestrian routes. With implementation of these protocols, the Project will not generate any significant adverse worker or traffic-related health or safety issues.

It is not anticipated that hazardous materials will be encountered during construction (buried, aerial, or wireless). However, if hazardous or potentially hazardous materials are encountered, the workers will follow the Project safety plan. The safety plan will include management and response requirements in the event contaminated media is encountered.

By adopting the safety and coordination efforts described above, it is anticipated that the Project can be constructed with no significant impacts to human health and safety.

Cumulative Impacts

As described above, the Project will not have significant adverse impacts on any of the environmental resource areas evaluated in the EA. As such, no cumulative impacts on the environment are anticipated.

Decision

Based on the above analysis, NTIA concludes that constructing and operating the Project as defined by the preferred alternative, identified BMPs, and protective measures, will not require additional mitigation. A separate mitigation plan is not required for the Project. The analyses indicate that the proposed action is not a major Federal action that will significantly affect the quality of the human environment. NTIA has determined that preparation of an EIS is not required.

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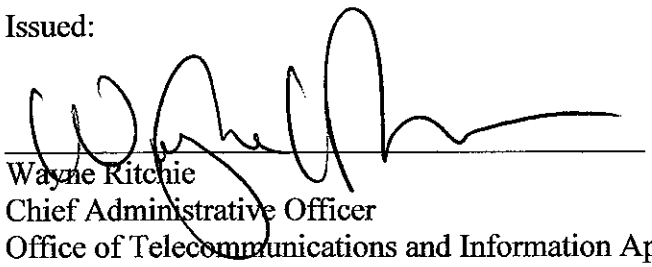

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