ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (EA)



VALLEY TELEPHONE COOPERATIVE, INC. RIO GRANDE VALLEY FIBER NETWORK (RGVFN) PROJECT

CAMERON, HILDALGO, STARR, AND WILLACY COUNTIES, TEXAS

Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP)

AND

National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA)

Prepared for:

Frank Monteferrante, PhD
Environmental Compliance Specialist
National Telecommunication and Information Administration
Broadband Technology Opportunities Program
1401 Constitution Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20230

PREPARED BY:

Benchmark Environmental Consultants 6116 North Central Expressway, Suite 808 Dallas, Texas 75206



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Valley Telephone Cooperative, Inc. Environmental Assessment

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1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In August 2010, Valley Telephone Cooperative, Inc. (VTCI) was awarded a grant from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's (NTIA) Broadband Technologies Opportunities Program (BTOP). The grant would be funding the Rio Grande Valley Fiber Network (RGVFN) project to install 153 miles of fiber optic cable and improve existing service and increase dark fiber resources available to local anchor institutions. The Project would be wholly managed and monitored by VTX Communications, LLC (VTXC), a subsidiary of VTCI. The project would be an extension of an existing VTXC transport network that would provide fiber optic connectivity to community anchor tenants throughout the Rio Grande Valley, Texas (Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Willacy Counties). The RGVFN project proposes to connect 27 community anchor institutions (CAIs) in Brownsville, Edinburg, Harlingen, McAllen, Raymondville, Rio Grande City, and Weslaco and would provide service area coverage over four counties and 150,000 square-miles.

This Environmental Assessment (EA) includes the detailed analyses of the two alternatives, the Proposed Action (Preferred Alternative) and the No Action Alternative. This analysis was conducted in compliance with the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) of 1969 requirements and follows the guidelines published by the Department of Commerce (DOC) and NTIA for BTOP award of Environmental Assessments. The project also initially considered a route alternative, a wireless alternative, and an all aerial alternative, but eliminated these from further review because they did not reasonably meet the purpose and need established for the project.

Under the Proposed Action, VTXC would install 153-miles of middle-mile, buried fiber optic cable within existing public right-of-ways along state, county and city right-of-ways within Cameron, Hidalgo, and Starr counties. In Cameron County, 5.25-miles of cable would be strung in existing duct owned and operated by VTXC which crosses the Arroyo Colorado. Though no actions would occur in Willacy County, one CAI located in Willacy County would benefit from increased network reliability. The project would also construct three points of presence (POP) sites located in Brownsville, Edinburg and Weslaco along the proposed route.

As part of this EA federal, state and local agencies were provided with documentation discussing and depicting the RGVFN project and asked to provide comments regarding potential effects of the Proposed Action. Agencies contacted included the Texas State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), area Tribal Governments, the Texas Parks and Wildlife (TPWD), US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC), Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT),

Texas General land Office (TxGLO), US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), and local county agencies.

On October 12, 2010 and March 21, 2011, Texas SHPO provided concurrence that the Proposed Action would be in compliance with the Section 106 of National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and that no historic properties would be affected. On January 31, 2011 USFWS provided concurrence that the project would either have no effect or would not be likely to adversely affect federally-list threatened or endangered species and would be in compliance with the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973. A summary of additional comments received from consulting agencies is included in Section 6.0 and Appendix G. Overall guidance was provided by the NTIA's environmental reviewer throughout EA development.

This EA finds that the Proposed Action would have no significant adverse environmental impacts due to the implementation of appropriate mitigation measures as discussed in detail throughout Section 5.0. The No Action Alternative fails to accomplish the project objectives and does not support anticipated population and employment growth or meet the needs of community anchor institutions. Summary results of this analysis are included below in Table 1.1.

TABLE 1.1 Summary of Proposed Environmental Effects by EA Section

Sectio			No Action
n	Resource	Proposed Action	Alternative
5.1	Geology and Soils	Short-term soil disturbance isolated in areas that have been previously disturbed existing ROW; no long-term effects.	No effects
5.2	Water	No direct effects; as all features will be directionally bored.	No effects
5.3	Biological	Short-term displacement of wildlife and disruption of herbaceous vegetation within existing ROW; no long-term effects.	No effects
5.4	Historical and Cultural	No effects; ROW adjacent to cemeteries and Our Lady of Visitation Church in Santa Maria, Texas would be directionally bored.	No effects
5.5	Air Quality	Short-term increase in particulate and greenhouse gases during construction; no long-term effects.	No effects
5.6	Noise	Short-term increase in noise during construction, noise mitigation near sensitive areas is required; no long-term effects.	No effects
5.7	Aesthetic and	Short-term aesthetic impact during	No effects

	Visual	construction; no significant long- term effects	
5.8	Land Use	No Effect; located within existing ROW.	No effects
5.9	Infrastructure	Short-term disturbance of utility during construction when outages may be necessary; Long-term beneficial effect of enhanced communication infrastructure.	Long term adverse effect of no enhanced communication infrastructure.
5.10	Socioeconomics	Short-term beneficial effect of increased local employment; long-term beneficial effect of enhanced communication infrastructure.	No effects. Existing needs for improved communications would continue to be unmet.
5.11	Human Health and Safety	No Effect.	No effects