



Final Environmental Assessment

For

NebraskaLink

Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP)

&

National Telecommunications and Information Administration

(NTIA)

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Executive Summary

NebraskaLink, LLC, Lincoln, NE has been awarded grant funding from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) through the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program to deploy a high-speed fiber network across Nebraska. The NebraskaLink fiber network will benefit schools, community colleges, healthcare providers, public safety, and other government facilities across Nebraska.

- The project as proposed in the application includes approximately 450 miles of new fiber, 682 miles of leased existing fiber, 844 miles of dark fiber, and 11 telecommunications huts. No ground breaking activity will be required for the leased fiber portion of the project.
- The network, as proposed in the application, is planned to connect directly to 101 community anchor institutions in nine Nebraska communities. NebraskaLink will also have the ability to interconnect with 3rd party last mile providers in these nine communities.
- NebraskaLink plans to interconnect with 3rd party last mile providers in 28 additional communities defined as Middle Mile Service Areas where they will not directly connect to community anchor institutions. These last mile connections will improve broadband services for businesses, residents, and 425 other anchor institutions.

NebraskaLink requested a change to a segment of the route that was proposed in the original application. This segment was in ring 1 of the proposed project plan and ran between Brady, Nebraska and Kearney, Nebraska. The original route segment involved fiber window leases of approximately 56 miles and 81 miles of new fiber construction. The requested change altered the route to traverse directly from Brady to Gibbon to Kearney along US Highway 30. The proposed route increased the new fiber construction distance from 81 miles to 90 miles, while decreasing the distance of leased fiber from 56 miles to 8.5 miles along that segment. Although, the fiber construction mileage increased, there will be no significant change in project cost or the proposed schedule since the need to bore under the Platte River will be avoided which is typically fairly expensive and takes more time than direct burying cable.

The proposed route will allow NebraskaLink to reach more Community Anchor Institutions thereby providing more access, broadband capability, and basic services to rural south central Nebraska. Specifically, the proposed route change will provide NebraskaLink with access to an additional five communities, five libraries, three

hospitals, 23 public schools in five school districts, one community college, five city governments, one county seat and numerous state offices spread through the five communities. The former route provided access to only two communities, two libraries, zero hospitals, 5 public schools in two school districts, zero community colleges, 2 city governments, zero county seats, and a very small number of state offices between the two communities. Both of these communities are within 10 – 15 miles of the new proposed route and are served by cities that will be served by the modified route, ensuring their access to service.

The proposed route change was approved by NTIA on January 14, 2011 and has been addressed in this Environmental Assessment. The agency consultations included this revised route.

The construction activities will include static plowing and directional boring cable into the ground, cleanup, and any possible site reclamation. Typically, following construction and cleanup, reclamation will be completed. The disturbed surfaces will be restored to the original contour of the land surface. Prefabricated huts will be placed on a concrete pad on private land acquired by NebraskaLink. These huts will be used to house transport electronics and fiber patch panels or fiber main frames.

NebraskaLink has contacted interested environmental and governmental agencies, as well as consulted with NTIA's NEPA coordinator and staff archaeologist on overall project guidance. Each agency was provided with a description and maps of the proposed project showing the area that could be affected by the proposed routing of new fiber optic cable in the state. Each agency was given the opportunity to comment on the proposed project and its potential effect on the environment. The agencies that were contacted are:

- Nebraska Historical Preservation Office
- US Fish and Wildlife Service
- US Corps of Army Engineers
- Nebraska Department of Natural Resources
- Bureau of Land Management
- Nebraska Department of Roads
- Nebraska Game and Parks Commission
- US EPA Region 7
- USDA Forest Service & Nebraska Grasslands
- Nebraska Department of Environmental Quality
- Nebraska County Highway Superintendent(s)

These agencies have subsequently submitted responses or permitting requests relating to the NebraskaLink Project. Specifically, the proposed project will pass through USDA Forest Service Land. A permit application has been received and will be submitted during the detailed engineering phase of the project. NebraskaLink also received a list of public lands from the Bureau of Land Management. The proposed project does not pass through BLM land according to that list.

In the preparation of the NTIA BTOP application, other construction methods and alternatives to the proposed project plan were considered. Those alternatives for the proposed facilities contained in this Environmental Assessment were “No Action”, wireless technology, aerial construction and alternate cable routing.