National Telecommunications and Information Administration
Broadband Technology Opportunities Program
Finding of No Significant Impact
Nexus Systems, Inc., Piney Woods Fiber Project

Summary

The Nexus Systems, Inc. (Nexus Systems) applied to the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) for a grant to install 120 miles of new fiber, construct three new equipment buildings, and add wireless equipment to 18 existing telecommunications towers. Nexus Systems will also install electronic fiber optic transmission equipment within three existing buildings to serve as connection or termination points for the new network. The fiber network will be installed underground in existing rights of way (ROWs). The new network will extend broadband access to 110 community anchor institutions (CAIs), and to the region's last-mile and middle-mile service providers. The proposed action passes through five Louisiana parishes, and is referred to as the Piney Woods Fiber Project (Project).

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) awarded a grant for the Project to Nexus Systems, 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.

Nexus Systems 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 120 miles of new fiber (and associated hand holes) across five Louisiana parishes by plowing, trenching, or directional drilling in existing ROWs;

- Constructing three equipment buildings to house switching and routing equipment on public property adjacent to highway ROWs;
- Installing electronic fiber optic transmission equipment within three existing buildings that will serve as connection or termination points for the new network;
- Placing new antenna equipment on 18 existing telecommunication towers; and
- Providing broadband access to 110 CAIs, and to the region's last-mile and middle-mile service providers.

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

Nexus Systems identified a need to expand and upgrade the existing broadband network to increase internet access and provide high-speed capability for unserved and underserved communities throughout north central Louisiana. In addition, commercial broadband service providers have not extended service to the less densely populated, rural parishes within the Project area, and as a result, the region has limited community broadband infrastructure. The purpose of the Project is to bring affordable broadband service to unserved and underserved communities across five parishes in Louisiana, including Rapides, Grant, Winn, Jackson, and Lincoln. The number of expected subscribers for the Project includes 110 CAIs, 1,800 business, and 55,000 households. The 110 CAIs include 67 public schools, 18 public libraries, 13 medical service facilities, 2 two-year colleges, 7 public safety agencies, and 3 four-year universities.

Without the new fiber, affordable broadband options at the needed bandwidth would not be available to many of the CAIs, residents, and businesses.

Project Description

Nexus Systems will install 120 miles of new fiber through 1.5-inch high-density polyethylene (HDPE) conduit, construct three new prefabricated concrete buildings, and add wireless equipment on 18 existing telecommunication towers. The network will include the installation of fiber underground within existing ROWs. In addition, the Project will install electronic fiber optic transmission equipment within three existing buildings to serve as connection or termination points along the Project route.

The majority of the fiber route will be installed 3-feet underground in existing ROWs, by plowing, trenching, or directional drilling. The plow method creates a narrow slit trench, places the cable, and backfills the trench in a continuous process as the plowing equipment advances forward. The trench method uses heavy equipment excavators or hand digging to create the trench and backfill with excavated soil. The directional drilling method will be primarily used to traverse ecologically sensitive areas (e.g., rivers and wetlands) and existing infrastructure (e.g., driveways and railroads). The directional drilling method involves excavating pits at the cable entry and exit points, drilling a horizontal cable pathway between the points, installing conduit, pulling the cable back through the conduit, and backfilling the pits. Hand holes will be installed approximately every 2,500 feet along the cable route regardless of the installation method.

Nexus Systems will construct three prefabricated concrete equipment buildings to house switching and routing equipment on public property adjacent to existing ROWs along the Project route. The buildings will be constructed at Grant High School, Dry Prong; Winnfield High School, Winnfield; and Jonesboro-Hodge Middle School, Jonesboro. The new buildings will be concrete with an exposed aggregate exterior finish measuring 10 feet wide by 12 feet long by 10 feet high and secured to a slab foundation. Each building site will occupy a total area of approximately 25 feet by 25 feet. Minimal clearing is anticipated because the majority of each site is currently maintained or previously disturbed. Similarly, minimal excavation and foundation construction is expected for the pre-fabricated concrete slabs. Four, 1.5 inch HDPE conduit will be installed, via trenching, to connect the main fiber line with each new building.

Nexus Systems will also install electronic fiber optic transmission equipment within three existing buildings to serve as connection or termination points for the regeneration of the transport signal along the fiber route. These locations include: Louisiana State University (LSU)/Huey P. Long Hospital, Pineville; an AT&T switch and routing building adjacent to an existing communications tower at the northwest corner of U.S. Highway 167 and LA 3072, Vienna, LA; and Grambling University facility, 521-531 R W E Jones Street, Grambling, LA. Electricity will be provided to each of these six building locations by existing service providers and backup generators. Backup generators are currently located at two of the equipment

building sites. Nexus Systems will install new natural gas fueled backup generators at the other four building sites.

The final element of the Project is the installation of wireless antenna infrastructure at 18 existing telecommunication tower sites, which were constructed and placed in service by Nexus Systems, Inc. in 2005. The existing towers are identified as Arcadia, Bernice, Castor, Choudrant, Downsville, Dubach, Farmerville, Gibsland, Haynesville, Hico, Homer, Lincoln, Marion, Ringgold, Saline, Simsboro, Summerfield, and Winnfield. Nexus Systems will use existing access roads or existing, adjacent road ROWs to transport the new equipment to the tower sites. The proposed new antenna infrastructure will not increase the height of the towers. These towers meet the criteria for collocation of antennas on towers constructed after March 16, 2001, as identified in the *Nationwide Programmatic Agreement for the Collocation of Wireless Antennas*. Nexus Systems has filed the appropriate Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Form 621 to record the collocation of licensed band services on these previously constructed towers.

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 Fiber and Wireless Installation (Preferred Alternative). The Project involves installing 120 miles of new fiber, placing antennas on 18 existing telecommunication towers, and constructing three equipment buildings. The network will extend broadband service to 110 CAIs, 1,800 business, and 55,000 households. The new fiber optic cable will be buried via plowing, trenching, or directional drilling.

No Action Alternative. No action was also considered. This alternative represents conditions as they currently exist in these five Louisiana parishes. Under the no action alternative, new fiber would not be constructed and new wireless tower antennas would not be installed. These communities would continue to be unserved or underserved with respect to broadband internet access. Additionally, broadband services would not be provided to CAIs in the Project area. The EA examined this alternative as the baseline for evaluating impacts relative to other alternatives being considered.

Alternatives Considered But Not Carried Forward. Nexus Systems considered three other alternatives, which were not carried forward through the EA because they did not meet the Purpose and Need, or they presented substantially greater impacts than the Preferred Alternative. An All-Aerial Network alternative was eliminated because of potential service disruptions from severe weather common to the Project area, as well as the environmental impacts to install

additional poles along the Project route. An All-Buried Network was rejected because of the need for additional underground construction work in sensitive and protected areas, and the associated additional permitting and agency consultation requirements and schedule impacts. An All-Wireless Network was found to be impracticable because wireless technology presently does not yet have the ability to deliver high-speed service to meet the Purpose and Need, and would involve more ground disturbance and environmental impacts than the Preferred Alternative.

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, Infrastructure, Socioeconomic Resources, and Human Health and Safety.

Noise

This Project will have short-term impacts on noise. The short-term increases in ambient noise levels are expected during the construction period. Although some of the CAIs may be sensitive noise receptors, construction-related noise will be temporary and similar to other roadway and light construction work experienced routinely across the Project area. Nexus Systems will require that contractors use abatement measures to make every reasonable effort to minimize construction noise. These measures may include work-hour controls and proper maintenance of muffler systems. Based on these considerations, no significant impacts on noise are expected to occur as a result of Project implementation.

Air Quality

Potential impacts on air quality will be both minimal in the short-term, related to construction, and long-term, related to operation of this Project. Fiber installed underground via plowing, trenching, and directional drilling will result in minor disturbance of the ground surface. Limited fugitive dust emissions will be generated during construction of the three prefabricated buildings and installation of buried fiber. There will also be long-term impacts on air quality from the generators, which are used as the backup power source for the three new prefabricated buildings and three existing buildings. A short-term minor increase in the use of fossil fuel and associated greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions will occur as a result of Project construction, but the emissions will be below established thresholds. Construction of the planned network is not expected to have significant adverse impacts on air quality.

Geology and Soils

The Project's fiber route will be installed underground in existing transportation ROWs. Installation methods will produce a narrow, shallow slit or trench that creates minimal ground disturbance. Directional drilling will be used to cross sensitive ecological resources, roadways, and existing utilities. Each new building site will disturb approximately 625 square feet of soil.

Appropriate BMPs will be implemented to prevent sedimentation and erosion impacts in the Project area, as outlined in the project specific Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP) and Erosion and Sedimentation Control Plan. For trenching, temporary erosion controls will be installed prior to or immediately after initial disturbance of the soil and properly maintained throughout Project construction. Directional drilling will avoid disturbance to water crossings and associated riparian areas. Drilling equipment will be set back a sufficient distance from the ordinary high water mark of associated streams, rivers, and wetlands, so that sediment will not wash into the waterway. Vegetation clearing will not occur in riparian areas.

In coordination with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), it was determined that the fiber optic route is not subject to the Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA) rules and regulations. It was also determined that the prefabricated buildings are located on sites already dedicated to urban development or within incorporated city/town limits and are exempt from the FPPA rules and regulations. The NRCS determined that the Preferred Alternative would not impact soils that are classified as prime, important, or Statewide and locally important farmland. Consequently, the Project is not expected to result in significant adverse impacts on geology or soils.

Water Resources

Project construction activities are not expected to impact to water resources. Directional drilling will be used to cross under water resources, such as wetlands, streams, and rivers. Drilling equipment will be set back a sufficient distance from the ordinary high water mark of associated streams, rivers, and wetlands, so that sediment will not wash into the waterway. Vegetation clearing will not occur in riparian areas. BMPs, such as the SWPPP, will also be used to minimize the potential for soil erosion and sedimentation at any crossings.

Nexus Systems has alerted the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Vicksburg District, of all planned water crossings applicable to permits under Section 10 of the Rivers and Harbors Act of 1899 or Section 404 of the Clean Water Act. In letters dated January 21, and March 18, 2011, the USACE Vicksburg District stated that, based on information provided, a Section 10 or Section 404 permit would not be required. Proposed stream crossings will be accomplished via directional drilling, and fiber will be installed in accordance with the USDA Rural Utilities Service specifications. The USACE requested that their office be contacted if any route changes are made to the Project.

The Project fiber route will cross floodplains or floodways. However, Nexus Systems will implement all practicable measures to minimize floodplain impacts. The fiber will be installed below grade and will result in no alteration of ground elevation. For stream and river crossings, the fiber will be installed at least 3-feet below the streambed. Above-ground structures will not be placed in floodplains or floodways. Nexus Systems consulted with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Region VI and the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (DOTD) Floodplain Management Program regarding potential impacts of the

Project on floodplains. In letters dated January 24 and January 27, 2011, FEMA Region VI and DOTD, respectively, directed Nexus Systems to contact the appropriate local floodplain administrator(s) to obtain the appropriate permits for the Project area. Subsequent agency coordination with the local floodplain administrators was initiated by Nexus Systems on January 31, 2011. Nexus Systems will obtain the necessary floodplain permits from the local floodplain administrators prior to conducting any work within these areas.

According to the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF), the Project route crosses Big Creek in Grant Parish within the U.S. Highway 167 ROW. Because Big Creek is designed as a Louisiana Natural and Scenic River, Nexus Systems consulted with the Louisiana Scenic Rivers Coordinator regarding this river crossing. In an email dated April 4, 2011, the Coordinator determined that the U.S. Highway 167 bridge was outside of the Scenic Rivers System, and a Scenic River Permit would not be required provided that BMPs are implemented to avoid construction debris, sediments, or materials from entering the waterbody. Adverse impacts to water resources will be further reduced by the implementation of BMPs described in the project specific SWPPP and Erosion and Sedimentation Control Plan. The SWPPP will include measures to reduce sediment transport, properly store materials and equipment, properly handle waste materials, and avoid accidental discharges of fuels or other chemicals.

According to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Sole Source Aquifer Program, portions of Grant and Rapides Parishes are located within the Chicot Aquifer System. However, this aquifer system is not located within the Project area. Therefore, there will be no impacts to this sole-source aquifer. By avoiding construction in waterways, and implementing erosion and sediment control BMPs, Nexus Systems will be able to construct the network with no significant adverse impacts on water resources.

Biological Resources

The Preferred Alternative may result in minor impacts on biological resources. Some disturbance to the ground surface will occur during construction activities, which will be limited to existing ROWs and previously disturbed areas. Approximately 625 square feet will be disturbed for each of the three new equipment building sites.

Nexus Systems consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and LDWF regarding potential impacts of the Project on biological resources. In responses dated February 15 and April 6, 2011, the USFWS concluded that, based on the information provided by Nexus Systems, the Project is not likely to adversely affect these resources and no further consultation is required under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The USFWS requested additional consultation if significant changes are made in the scope or location of work.

The following measures will be implemented by Nexus Systems to protect biological resources along the project route. Directional drilling originating and terminating within U.S. Highway 167 ROW will be used to install fiber at surface water crossings to avoid impacts to Louisiana

pearlshell mussel (*Margaritifera hembeli*). Additionally, the project specific SWPPP and Erosion and Sedimentation Control Plan will include BMPs to reduce adverse water quality impacts to any streams containing Louisiana pearlshell mussels. Project construction personnel will be informed that nesting Bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) may be present within the Project area, and that Nexus Systems must identify, avoid, and immediately report any observed bald eagle nests to the USFWS. If bald eagles are observed foraging or roosting near proposed Project, Nexus Systems will coordinate with the local USFWS office to minimize potentially disruptive activities. If a bald eagle's nest is discovered near where activities would occur during the nesting season (October 1 – May 15), Nexus Systems will consult with the USFWS and conduct an evaluation to determine whether the Project is likely to disturb nesting bald eagles.

In a letter dated February 24, 2011, the LDWF provided information on State-listed rare, threatened, or endangered species within the Project area. LDWF has determined that there are records of one Federally-listed species, the red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*), and two State species of concern within the Project area. Red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) habitat may present within one mile of the Project route. On January 18, 2011, LDWF concluded that, based on the information provided by Nexus Systems, RCW habitat is not present within or immediately adjacent to the proposed project within the WMA and a RCW survey is not required. To minimize potential impacts to the State species of concern, Nexus Systems will implement erosion and sedimentation controls to avoid or minimize impacts, as recommended by Louisiana Department of Natural Resources (LDNR). Based on this analysis, Nexus Systems will be able to construct the network with no significant adverse impacts on biological resources.

Historic and Cultural Resources

On November 24, 2010, a consultation initiation letter, including a detailed Project description, was sent by NTIA to the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) in Louisiana. NTIA informed the SHPO that any telecommunication facility components of the project would be consulted under the relevant Federal Communication Commission's Nationwide Programmatic Agreements (NPA), per the relevant Comment *Program Comment for Streamlining Section 106 Review for wireless Communication Facilities Construction and Modification Subject to Review Under the FCC Nationwide Programmatic Agreement and/or the Nationwide Programmatic Agreement for the Co-location of Wireless Antennas*, issued by the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation Program on November 25, 2009. Following the initiation letter, Nexus Systems contracted with Michael Backer Jr., Inc. to analyze the archeological and architectural resources within the Project's area of potential effect (APE). A records check identified numerous historic structures within the Project APE, with the majority occurring in the communities of Ruston, Winnfield, and Pineville. Of the sites listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), none of the identified structures are located in the APE. A field view of the APE was also conducted on February 2-3, 2011, February 24, 2011, and March 22, 2011, to determine the potential impact of the proposed Project on archaeological resources. A report summarizing the findings of the cultural resources review was submitted to the SHPO on March 9, 2011. An addendum to the report, which added an analysis of the Jonesboro to Weston and Ruston to

Grambling segments, was provided to the SHPO on March 30, 2011. In a response dated April 7, 2011, the SHPO determined that the Project would have no effect on historic properties within the APE.

Nexus Systems has filed the appropriate FCC Form 621 to record the collocation of licensed band services on these previously constructed towers. Nexus Systems must complete FCC requirements and obtain appropriate permits and licenses regarding mounting and operating equipment on existing towers.

Through the Tower Construction Notification System (TCNS), NTIA provided Project details to 10 Tribes interested in the Project's geographical location (Louisiana). Nexus Systems received responses from seven Tribes that were notified about the Project. Nexus Systems provided additional information to these Tribes, as requested. To date, no response has been received from the Tribes to which Nexus Systems sent additional information. The remaining three Tribes originally notified of the Project through TCNS have not responded as of June 6, 2011.

All construction will be restricted to previously disturbed areas. If any cultural material is discovered during construction, the SHPO will be notified immediately and all activities halted until a qualified archaeologist assesses the cultural remains. If any human skeletal remains or protected Native objects are uncovered during construction, construction will stop immediately, and appropriate authorities informed, including law enforcement agencies, the SHPO, and interested Tribes. Based on these consultations and additional protective measures to be implemented by Nexus Systems, the Project is not expected to have significant adverse impacts on historic and cultural resources.

Aesthetic and Visual Resources

The Project involves installing fiber optic cable by burying the cable underground in existing ROWs, constructing three equipment buildings in previously disturbed areas, and installing new wireless equipment on 18 existing telecommunication towers. The fiber optic cable will be located along major roadways, including a portion along U.S. Highway 167 ROW within the Kisatchie National Forest. Underground fiber installation will have a minor and temporary impact on aesthetic and visual resources due to the presence of construction equipment and limited soil disturbance. Because the proposed new antenna infrastructure on the towers will not increase the height of the existing towers, no long term visual impacts will occur. Accordingly, the Project is not expected to have a significant adverse impact on aesthetic and visual resources in the Project area.

Land Use

The fiber will be installed in previously disturbed ROWs, and the three prefabricated concrete buildings will be located on public property adjacent to existing ROWs along the Project route. Approximately 25 miles of the fiber route will cross through the Catahoula and Winn Ranger Districts of the Kisatchie National Forest along U.S. Highway 167 ROW. Nexus Systems has

consulted with the U.S. Department of Agriculture – Forest Service (USDA-FS) regarding the proposed Project activities. Nexus Systems submitted an Application for Transportation and Utility Systems and Facilities on Federal Lands (Form SF-299) on April 14, 2011. In an email dated April 26, 2011, the USDA-FS requested additional information for the proposed activities. Nexus Systems provided a follow-up response to the USDA-FS via email on May 3, 2011. Nexus Systems will obtain a special use permit from the USDA-FS prior to conducting any work within these areas. Therefore, the Project will have no significant adverse impact on land use.

Infrastructure

The Project will improve communications infrastructure and is expected to improve the transfer of information among CAIs, businesses, and individuals residing within the communities along the Project route. Existing buried utilities will be identified, located, and avoided. Existing railroad and roadway crossings, sidewalk areas, or other similar infrastructure will be crossed underground by directional drilling. The majority of the work will be conducted within existing ROWs and recently widened roadways; therefore, minimal effects on traffic are anticipated. Nexus Systems will obtain the necessary permits from the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (LDTD) to place the fiber optic cable within the roadway/highway ROW and from all railroad companies whose rail lines will be crossed. The new buildings will connect to existing power lines. Overall, the Project will have a positive impact on infrastructure within five parishes in Louisiana, and is not anticipated to result in significant impacts on infrastructure.

Socioeconomic Resources

The Preferred Alternative supports the regional economic development plan for the State of Louisiana and its primary objectives. These objectives include advancing the productivity and economic competitiveness of Louisiana's workforce, strengthening Louisiana's physical and digital connections to the global economy, and focusing on economic growth. Specifically, the Project will expand the region's existing fiber optic networks within north central Louisiana. The project will create jobs, provide greater broadband access for educational institutions, and advance health care innovation in unserved and underserved areas. Additional benefits include affordable broadband access for local consumers and businesses. The Project will have positive impacts on socioeconomic resources, and is not anticipated to result in significant impacts on socioeconomic resources.

Human Health and Safety

Hazardous waste sites have been identified near the Project area. However, most of these sites have been remediated and are not located within the Project route. In addition, fiber will be installed underground, in existing ROWs, by plowing, trenching, or directional drilling that will result in minimal soil disturbance. Therefore, no impacts are anticipated along the fiber route. If contaminated soils are encountered during the project, Nexus Systems will stop construction work in that affected section immediately, inform the relevant authorities and regulators, and, if needed, contract with an environmental consult to determine best management and control of the

contaminated soil. Installation of hand holes may require appropriate offsite disposal if contaminated soils are encountered.

BMPs for workplace safety will be implemented to protect workers and the public along the Project route. Contractors will be required to take appropriate measures to prevent, minimize, and control the spill of hazardous materials in the construction area. Contractors will adhere to all Federal, State, and local safety and health laws and regulations under the applicable Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the DOTD guidelines to ensure compliance with proper safety and installation procedures, including the handling of unanticipated hazardous materials and/ or petroleum contamination. Workers will be required to meet OSHA standards for worker visibility, equipment signage, and licensing requirements. When work is conducted in urban areas, Nexus Systems shall maintain safe pedestrian routes. Work conducted in or around school zones will be coordinated with school district officials to ensure safe passage for pedestrian and bus traffic. With implementation of these protection measures, the Project will not generate any significant adverse worker or traffic-related health or safety issues.

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 identified 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.

Issued:

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Date