DECISION NOTICE:
Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc.
Power Line Easement Adjustment on Woods Ranch WMA

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 1
490 North Meridian Road, Kalispell, MT 598901
Phone 406-752-5501
July 29, 2020

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

On November 27, 2019, a major wind event hit northwest Montana, resulting in significant timber blowdown on portions of the WRWMA and knocking down power lines and utility poles operated by Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc. (Lincoln Electric). Lincoln Electric currently holds two historic, 20-foot right-of-way easements to operate and maintain approximately 2 miles of overhead power line on portions of the WRWMA. These easements were obtained prior to FWP acquisition of the WRWMA in 1978 and provide power to landowners east and west of the WRWMA.

The WRWMA is managed with the primary objective of providing winter range for elk, mule deer and bighorn sheep. While nearly all forested habitat on the WRWMA (approx. 600 acres) was impacted to some extent by the blowdown, approximately 50 acres located in the southern portion of the WRWMA, T37NR26W S 18 were severely impacted. Approximately 0.86 miles of powerline span this area and were severely damaged by the blowdown.

Given the 2019 wind event, and a similar occurrence in 2009, Lincoln Electric is requesting that their right-of-way easements be adjusted to permit the removal of all overhead powerlines from the WRWMA and installation of approximately 0.65 miles of buried transmission line along existing WRWMA roadways. This action would mitigate any future concerns of trees falling on the overhead lines, provide easier access for Lincoln Electric maintenance staff, and provide several benefits to the WRWMA, which include:

- Mitigating the risk of an accidental fire on the WRWMA.
- Returning portions of the WRWMA to a more natural aesthetic
- Improving big game winter security by moving the right-of-way easement to existing roads and allowing utility maintenance consistent with WRWMA closure dates
- Minimizing the spread of noxious weeds via overhead line maintenance equipment
- Mitigate the potential of avian collision with overhead lines on the WRWMA
- Mitigate the potential of wildlife or human electrocution from downed overhead lines
- Improve safety when conducting aerial game surveys on the WRWMA
- Reduced utility easement footprint on the WRWMA

Alternative A: No Action

No change to Lincoln Electric utility easements will be considered at this time. Existing overhead power lines will remain in place and continue to be maintained by Lincoln Electric staff throughout the year. A buried line will not be installed along the proposed route.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

The proposed action would include:

- Removal of all overhead powerline from the WMA (approx. 2 miles)
- Installation of approximately 0.65 miles of buried powerline along existing WMA roads
- Adjustment of existing right-of-way easements held by Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc.

Under this proposal, FWP is proposing to exchange Lincoln Electric's held right of way easements, associated with the overhead powerline, for a new easement along portions of existing roads on the WMA.

The proposed underground route would parallel two existing roadways (Burma Road and Moore Lane). Starting at the NE corner of T37N26W S18 the line would be buried on the east side of the Burma Rd., on private property, and continue for approximately 0.25 mi. Here, Burma Rd turns west, onto the WMA and continues for approximately 0.32 mi. At the junction of Burma Road and Moore Lane, the line would cross Burma Road and follow the west side of Moore Lane. After crossing onto private property for approximately 281 ft, the line would parallel Moore Lane, on the WMA for 0.34 mi. In total, approximately 0.65 miles of line would be buried on the WMA.

All work associated with powerline removal and installation would be conducted by Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc. staff, at no cost to FWP. Access to the project areas would be from existing roads to minimize the spread of noxious weeds. Exposed bare mineral soils would be reseeded immediately and any weed infestations would be treated with herbicides indefinitely through annual weed management efforts. FWP would work with Lincoln Electric staff to ensure due diligence given for the easement trade and draft a new right-of-way easement for the WRWMA.

PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and to make a decision based on this information. FWP released a draft environmental assessment (EA) for public review of this proposal (Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc. Power Line Easement Adjustment on Woods Ranch WMA) on June 26, 2020 and accepted public comment for 29 days until July 25, 2020.

Legal notice of the availability of the Draft EA was published once each in the Tobacco Valley News (Eureka, July 1), Flathead Beacon (July 1) and Independent Record (Helena, July 5) newspapers.

FWP provided notice via postcard of the EA's availability to 24 landowners adjacent to the WRWMA, Additionally, email notifications were sent to news and media outlets, interested individuals, groups and agencies. The EA was available for public comment on FWP's web site (http://fwp.mt.gov,"Public Notices") from June 26 through July 25,2020.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Summary of Public Comment

FWP received 2 comments during the public review period, 1 supporting the proposed action and the other indicating neither support or opposition (Appendix A).

Comments received in support of the proposed action included:

- Dear Fish Wildlife & Parks Commission,
  I support the modification of the Lincoln Electric right-of-way to buried powerline. Given the likelihood of trees falling on the overhead line, it makes sense to bury this line. It might even prevent a fire in the future.

Response to Public Comment

The following comments encompass specific issues, questions or suggestions received during the public comment period, along with FWP's responses.

Comment: *(A) Is there anyway the cooperative could get service to their customers in some manner instead of overhead across our WRWMA, like going another route outside our WRWMA, or solar/wind source as an alternative, so we don't impact wildlife habitat and make permanent poor routing.*

FWP Response: *(A) After consulting with Lincoln Electric staff, it was determined that all overhead lines on the WRWMA could be removed with no additional line installation beyond that described within the proposed action. The proposed action was modified to reflect the removal of all overhead lines.*

DECISION

Based upon the EA and the applicable laws, regulations, and policies, we have determined that the proposed action will not have negative effects on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, we conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis, and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is unnecessary.

This project was reviewed by an interdisciplinary team including wildlife biologists, land conservation specialists, fisheries biologists and Lincoln Electric staff. Comments on the EA were supportive, without opposition. The proposal was well publicized.

No concerns were raised that would bring the environmental analysis into question. In consideration of these facts I adopt the Draft EA as final.

Based on the analysis in the draft EA and the public comment received, I have selected the "Proposed Action" (Alternative B). I will recommend to the Fish & Wildlife Commission that it approves FWP's proposed Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc. Power Line Easement Adjustment on Woods Ranch WMA, as described in the EA. This would occur at the Commission's next regularly scheduled meeting, which would be October 22, in Helena.

Jim Williams
Region 1 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

7/30/20
Date

APPENDIX A. Comments on the proposed Lincoln Electric Cooperative Inc. Power Line Easement Adjustment on Woods Ranch WMA) received by FWP during the comment period of June 26 through July 25, 2020. (Comments received via E = email.)

Com-menter #	Via	Para-graph	Comment
1	E	1	Is there anyway the cooperative could get service to their customers in some manner instead of overhead across our WRWMA, like going another route outside our WRWMA, or solar/wind source as an alternative, so we don't impact wildlife habitat and make permanent poor routing.
2	E	1	Dear Fish Wildlife & Parks Commission, I support the modification of the Lincoln Electric right-of-way to buried powerline. Given the likelihood of trees falling on the overhead line, it makes sense to bury this line. It might even prevent a fire in the future