

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

South Central Mississippi Broadband Infrastructure Project

Broadband Technology Opportunities Program

Award Number: NT10BIX5570074

Prepared for:

U.S. Department of Commerce
National Telecommunications and Information Administration
1401 Constitution Avenue NW
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On behalf of:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This Environmental Assessment (EA) was prepared on behalf of Contact Network, Inc. (d/b/a InLine), recipient of a Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP) grant award, for submittal to the US Department of Commerce National Telecommunications Information Administration (NTIA). Contact Network, Inc. is proposing the South Central Mississippi Broadband Infrastructure Project, which would construct a middle mile fiber optic network throughout southern and central Mississippi. The purpose of this EA is to document the environmental benefits and consequences of the proposed project for use in NTIA's decision making process to determine whether or not the project would significantly affect the environment. The EA was prepared pursuant to NEPA; the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations implementing NEPA (40 CFR 1500-1508); and the NTIA/BTOP guidance manual, *Environmental Assessment Guidance for BTOP Award Recipients* (August 2010).

The South Central Mississippi Broadband Infrastructure Project encompasses 17 counties in Mississippi. Construction of new fiber optic broadband infrastructure is proposed in Copiah, Covington, Forrest, Hinds, Jefferson Davis, Jones, Lauderdale, Lawrence, Leake, Lincoln, Marion, Newton, Pike, Rankin, Simpson, Smith, and Walthall Counties.

Purpose and Need

The South Central Mississippi Broadband Infrastructure Project would provide the middle mile fiber infrastructure necessary to connect core community institutions and last mile service providers in the region to the Internet backbone. The purposes of the South Central Mississippi Broadband Infrastructure Project are to:

- Provide multi-gigabit broadband access and connect public school districts within the geographic area of the South Central Mississippi Consortium for Educational Excellence and Development with speeds of up to 1 Gbps.
- Provide regional hospitals with the bandwidth needed to share the large files associated with electronic medical records and various telemedicine applications to streamline and improve the quality of healthcare.
- Enhance educational opportunities by linking regional schools to remote research tools, distance learning, and video conferencing.
- Enable intelligent transportation system upgrades such as real-time traffic monitoring and traffic flow management during emergency evacuations.
- Improve public safety by linking geographically disparate first responders and state agencies over an interoperable fiber-based system with remote video surveillance, security cameras, and remote fire monitoring.

Proposed Action and Alternatives

The proposed South Central Mississippi Broadband Infrastructure Project consists of installing approximately 840 miles of new fiber optic broadband infrastructure (635 middle miles and 205 last miles), either by lashing aerial cable to existing utility poles or burying underground cable in existing transportation or utility rights of way. Approximately 200 miles of existing commercial fiber would also be leased.

The proposed network would include 32 Points of Interconnection (housed in prefabricated concrete telecommunication huts) throughout the project area communities. The network would also include more than 200 connections to community anchor institutions, as well as potential last mile connections.

The primary components that characterize the proposed action and that would differentiate potential build alternatives are the fiber route, installation method, and number and location of necessary structures and connections. The EA alternative development and evaluation process allowed for refinement and revision of the preferred route, installation method, location of structures, etc., if necessary for avoidance of any impacts or constraints that were identified as new information and data was collected. This flexibility streamlines the project delivery process by eliminating the need to evaluate the impacts of multiple build alternatives. Thus, one build alternative, the proposed action/preferred alternative, and a no build/no action alternative were carried forward and analyzed in detail in the EA. Other build alternatives were evaluated but dismissed from further detailed analysis, including all aerial deployment, all burial deployment, and wireless deployment.

Potential Impacts

The EA identified and documented potential adverse impacts to the environment as a result of the proposed action. The impacts are primarily minor, temporary construction-related impacts that would be minimized with standard best management practices. With the appropriate avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures that have been identified (as described below), the proposed action would not result in any significant adverse impacts.

Environmental Commitments

Contact Network, Inc. will ensure that the following commitments are implemented and coordinated with consulting parties as appropriate.

Cultural Resources

The three previously recorded archaeological sites in the project corridor (22Hi629, 22Hi653, and 22Hi851) will be avoided. If earth disturbing activities during project construction uncover cultural materials (i.e. structural remains, historic artifacts, or prehistoric artifacts), all work shall cease and interested Tribes, the SHPO, and NTIA shall be notified immediately. Such construction activities may then only continue with the written approval of NTIA.

If earth disturbing activities during any area of the project uncover human remains, all work shall 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 shall be secured and the relevant law enforcement personnel (e.g. local police or County Coroner) and NTIA shall be notified immediately. Such construction activities may then only continue with the written approval of NTIA.

Groundwater

Groundwater protection measures and best management practices during construction will be implemented, as applicable, including proper containment and removal of all debris from any necessary demolition; adherence to county floodplain management plans and public notification processes; adherence to all federal, state, and local government permits, ordinances, planning

designs construction codes, operation and maintenance requirements, and engineering; use of best management practices for erosion and sedimentation control; and proper drainage and storm water designs.

Protected Species

The proposed action alignment will be surveyed for the gopher tortoise and its burrows prior to construction in the six listed counties. If a burrow is located during the survey, the alignment of the proposed action alternative will be modified by relocating to the opposite side of the road or, where that is not possible, a 25-foot minimum buffer would be kept around the burrow to avoid any ground disturbance. Work crews will be educated prior to construction in the six counties in recognizing gopher tortoises and what to do if one is encountered. If a gopher tortoise is encountered during construction, work will stop and the USFWS and MDWF&P will be notified.

Should any bald eagles or their nests be observed during implementation of the project, USFWS and MDWF&P would be notified, and best management practices would be used, such as avoiding construction during nesting season.

Human Health and Safety

Construction contracts will include provisions for the protection of health and safety of construction personnel and the public. A safety plan and training program will be developed prior to construction, and the plan will address topics such as worker safety and visibility; traffic control and safety for drivers; equipment operation; proper personal protective equipment; hazardous materials identification and handling; environmental hazards; accident prevention; emergency procedures; and basic first aid and first responder techniques.

A project safety officer will be appointed, whose role will be monitoring and enforcing all safety procedures. Safety rules will be posted during installation and reviewed regularly with all onsite personnel.

Permitting

Coordination with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Mobile and Vicksburg Districts will occur in order to obtain Department of the Army Section 10 and/or Section 404 permit(s) as required. The permit application process will be conducted during the final design phase of the project once construction plans are complete and final impacts to jurisdictional waters are determined. The Corps will make the determination on what types of permit(s) are needed. Mitigation would be provided in one or more of the study area river basins in a mitigation bank designated by the Corps. Specific mitigation ratios and mitigation sites will be determined during the permitting process.

Coordination with MDEQ will occur in order to obtain Section 401 Water Quality certification and Section 402 NPDES permit(s) as required. Sedimentation control BMPs will be implemented and monitored during construction.