

# First Step Internet Environmental Assessment



Prepared for the National Telecommunications and Information Administration

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# **First Step Internet Environmental Assessment**

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## Acronyms and Abbreviations

CEDA	Clearwater Economic Development Association
EA	Environmental Assessment
FPPA	Farmland Protection Policy Act
MBTA	Migratory Bird Treaty Act
NTIA	National Telecommunications and Information Administration
SIP	State Implementation Plan
USFWS	United States Fish and Wildlife Service
USGS	United States Geological Survey

## Section 1.0 Executive Summary

In 2005, the Clearwater Economic Development Association (CEDA) conducted a study to determine how to best provide broadband telecommunications in North Central Idaho to spur economic development. An assessment study concluded that broadband services in this region of Idaho were extremely lacking. The project submitted by First Step Internet achieves 80% of the goals set forth in that study, particularly the need for a high speed regional backbone network. This will be achieved through the construction of 10 new towers, the installation of high capacity, licensed microwave radios and other telecommunications equipment and the leveraging of existing towers and infrastructure currently in place as part of the First Step Internet network.

The project will consist of the construction of 10 wireless communications towers at the following locations: West Twin – Moscow; Paradise Ridge – Moscow; Spud (Potato) Hill – Deary; Lewiston Rim – Lewiston; Winchester Grade; Mt. Idaho – Grangeville; Doty Ridge – Kamiah; and 3 towers in Elk City. This composes the core of the construction phase of the project. First Step will be utilizing a number of existing towers as well. In addition to tower construction, First Step will be installing microwave radios and antennas as well as routers and other network equipment.

A number of the towers will be located within the Reservation boundaries of the Nez Perce Tribe. First Step Internet and the Nez Perce Tribe executed a memorandum of agreement for partnership and collaboration on the development of this project.

The one major alternative considered in the CEDA study was the construction of a fiber optic network throughout the region. Due to the mountainous terrain, this option would be much more challenging, but doable. Such a project would have a much greater impact in terms of land and other environmental, cultural, and historical concerns. Running fiber for the hundreds of miles needed, some across Nez Perce Tribal land, would constitute an exponentially greater impact on the land and resources than the comparatively minimal impact described above for the addition of 10 new towers. Another major consideration was the cost to install a fiber optic network.

An Environmental Assessment (EA) was conducted for the proposed tower installations to evaluate the potential environmental impacts. The following resource areas were evaluated:

- Noise,
- Air quality,
- Geology and soils,
- Water resources,
- Biological resources,
  - Wildlife, vegetation, threatened and endangered species, and wetland habitat;
  - Water resources; and
  - Migratory birds.
- Historic and cultural resources,

- Archeological resources;
- Architectural resources; and
- Native resources.
- Aesthetic and visual resources,
- Land use,
- Infrastructure,
- Socioeconomic resources, and
- Human health and safety.

Five criteria were used to evaluate the potential environmental impacts for each resource at each site. These include:

- No additional impact (locations where towers already exist),
- No impact,
- Potential impact,
- Beneficial impact (i.e., socioeconomic), and
- Short term impact (during the construction phase).

Because nine of the towers will be co-located with other towers or buildings, no additional impacts are anticipated beyond the construction phase. Spud (Potato) Hill does not have an existing tower or building. The tower sites for Elk City will be located on or near existing buildings. However, the addition of a tower is not anticipated to have negative environmental impacts aside from potential visual impacts and the potential to interfere with migratory birds, which are afforded protection under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA). First Step Internet will attempt to mitigate the potential impacts for all the towers by building the tower heights under 199 feet (Spud (Potato) Hill, Kamiah, and Elk City towers will be approximately 50 feet high; all others will be 100 feet high), using a concrete pad rather than guy wires for the foundation of the tower (the Spud (Potato) Hill and Elk City #1 towers will be attached to existing buildings), and not lighting the towers. The site visits did not find any endangered species near the proposed tower locations.

## **Section 2.0 Purpose and Need**

In 2005, the CEDA conducted a study to determine how to best provide broadband telecommunications in North Central Idaho to spur economic development. An assessment study concluded that broadband services in this region of Idaho were extremely lacking. The project submitted by First Step Internet achieves 80% of the goals set forth in that study, particularly the need for a high speed regional backbone network. This will be achieved through the construction of 10 new towers; the installation of high capacity, licensed microwave radios and other telecommunications equipment; and the leveraging of existing towers and infrastructure currently in place as part of the First Step Internet network.