

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Environmental Assessment for Swanson River Telecommunications Tower, Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

SUMMARY

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) proposes to issue a right-of-way (ROW) permit to authorize continuation of a communications tower and parabolic antennas in the Swanson River Oil Field on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. The Environmental Assessment (EA) attached to this document analyzes the consequences of five alternatives. We chose the proposed action over the other alternatives. This Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) documents our conclusion that the proposed action will not have any significant impacts on the quality of the human environment.

ACTION PURPOSE & NEED

General Communication Inc. (GCI) is presently using three parabolic microwave antennae attached to a 205-foot telecommunication tower owned by Union Oil Company of California (UOCC). The 205-foot tower is located adjacent to a 140-foot tower owned by UOCC. This tower and adjacent tower are on a gravel pad within the Swanson River Oil and Gas Facility (SROGF). Today, the primary use of the 205-foot tower is to broadcast long-distance, common-carrier communications between the Kenai Peninsula and Anchorage. This tower was erected in 1989 by GCI and Atlantic Richfield Company, UOCC's predecessor, and began carrying communication to, from, and within the SROGF. At the same time, the tower also began carrying common-carrier traffic. Because the original use of the tower was associated with the SROGF, and authorized under the Mineral Leasing Act, neither a permit nor environmental review was sought. In 1999, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) requested that GCI submit a ROW permit application to authorize GCI's non-oilfield use of the tower. It was subsequently determined that UOCC was the appropriate ROW permit applicant and GCI withdrew its application. On October 15, 2002 UOCC submitted a ROW permit application. The ROW permit would authorize the non-oilfield use of the tower up to 20 years as long as the SROGF remains in use. If the SROGF is no longer in use, the ROW permit would terminate.

SUMMARY OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

The proposed action is to issue a ROW permit to authorize the non-oilfield use of the 205-foot communication tower and the three GCI-owned parabolic microwave antennae that provide common-carrier telecommunications service to the Kenai Peninsula. All equipment will remain on site and all systems will remain active. UOCC will pay appropriate fees and permit costs to comply with regulations. Should GCI's

contemporaneous, non-oilfield use of the tower terminate at any time, UOCC's sole use of the tower, including the legal necessity for a new permit, shall be governed by the laws in effect at the time pertaining to the existence of the tower in the SROGF.

Four other alternatives were considered. Alternative 1 would combine all antennae onto the 205-foot tower, and removing the adjacent 140-foot tower. Alternative 2 would replace the 205-foot tower with a self-supporting tower, and the current 205-foot tower has guy wires. Alternative 3 would remove the 205-foot tower and all associated common-carrier communication equipment, and return to UOCC's original infield communication system on the 140-foot tower. The No-Action alternative would involve leaving both towers and the GCI-owned parabolic antennae in place without receiving a ROW permit from the Service.

EFFECTS AND FINDINGS

The EA evaluated the effects of the proposed action and alternatives on air quality, water, vegetation, wildlife, cultural resources, subsistence, and aesthetics. As the towers already exist and are located on a gravel pad, most environmental effects occurred at the time of construction. Both the towers are secured by 18 guy wires each and there is a potential for bird strikes due to their proximity. However, historical observations made by on-site operators suggest the occurrence of bird strikes is rare. The EA found that overall effects as a result of continuing the towers were negligible. The EA also found that the cumulative impacts to resources as a result of the proposed action would be negligible.


The approximate cost to provide the same secondary use as this communication system at a location off the refuge would be an additional \$800,000 per site for at least two additional sites with towers. Two sites would be required to support the radio link and provide service comparable to that which is maintained from the SROGF. It would yield a less robust communications system and would also require construction of similar sites in similar undisturbed wildlife habitat in the Chugach National Forest or on State of Alaska lands. The primary use and all equipment would continue to exist at the Swanson River location with only a reduction in rack utilization within the communications building.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Because the tower and equipment has been in place for years and because the project has been subject of legal action, no public involvement was conducted. The EA and this Finding of No Significant Impact will be available to the public for 30 days, before the right-of-way permit is issued.

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Based on a review and evaluation of the information contained the EA, I have determined that the proposed project is not a major federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment as defined in Section 102 (2)c of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. This determination is made after full consideration of the context and intensity of the project. The proposed action will not jeopardize any federally-listed Threatened or Endangered species or their habitats. The proposed action would not significantly restrict subsistence uses of federal public lands. The analysis of the EA indicates there will not be a significant impact, individually or cumulatively, on the quality of the human environment and I therefore find that an Environmental Impact Statement need not be prepared.



Regional Director

April 29, 2008

Date