

SCREENING FORM FOR DETERMINING LOW-EFFECT HABITAT CONSERVATION PLANS

I. Project Information

A. Project name: AEP Talawanda to McAlester Transmission Line Project

B. Affected species: American Burying Beetle (*Nicrophorus americanus*)

C. Project size (preferably in acres):

The plan area covers two segments of the Talawanda to McAlester Transmission Line Project right-of-way, which is 100 feet wide. The plan area segments are 1.15 and 0.96 miles long and 100 feet wide. In total, the plan area (northern and southern portions) amounts to 25.6 acres.

D. Brief project description including minimization and mitigation plans:

The project is implementation of the Talawanda to McAlester Transmission Line Project Habitat Conservation Plan. American Electric Power (AEP) is constructing a transmission line in Pittsburgh County, Oklahoma, in order to meet capacity needs for the City of McAlester and the Steven Taylor Industrial Park. Two segments of the transmission line 100-foot wide right-of-way (1.15 and 0.96 miles long each) contain occupied ABB habitat, based on positive surveys from June 2015. The plan area boundary incorporated the transmission line segments within a 0.5-mile radius of the two positive ABB surveys. Take of ABB could result from construction of the transmission line. American Electric Power has prepared a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) to obtain an incidental take permit.

Covered activities of the HCP include site preparation for construction and installation of new power poles. These activities will result in temporary disturbance of soil and vegetation, and permanent vegetation removal where power poles are installed. All activities covered by the plan and authorized by the incidental take permit will occur within the plan area (25.6 acres). Within the plan area, 13.07 acres (51%) supports suitable ABB habitat based on field surveys in January 2016.

The HCP's goals and objectives for the ABB include minimizing impacts from the covered activities, including restoring ABB habitat where temporary impacts occur, and mitigating the loss of ABB habitat based on established mitigation ratios within the Conservation Priority Area for the species. The transmission line alignment was designed to minimize impacts to ABB by siting it in farmland and along roads wherever feasible. Avoidance and minimization measures will be implemented to reduce the potential for direct take of ABB and its habitat, including limiting the use of motor vehicles, heavy equipment, and artificial lighting; and restoring ABB habitat by revegetating areas where vegetation has been

removed. After implementation of all avoidance and minimization measures, some unavoidable impacts to ABB habitat remain: temporary impacts (10.42 acres), permanent cover change impacts (2.65 acres), and permanent impacts (0.006 acres) (all habitat types are as defined by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service)). All of these unavoidable impacts will be mitigated in a Service-approved ABB conservation bank according to Service-established mitigation ratios, resulting in a total of 7.87 acres of ABB habitat to be conserved in perpetuity. Additionally, areas of temporary vegetation removal (13.07 acres) will be monitored over the 3-year permit term to ensure that they are restored to ABB habitat during the permit terms. Monitoring results will be documented in annual reports submitted to the Service.

II. Does the HCP fit the low-effect criteria in the Service's Habitat Conservation Planning Handbook (1996)?

A. Are the effects of the HCP minor or negligible on federally listed, proposed, or candidate species and their habitats covered under the HCP? (Handbook pg. 1-8 and 1-9)

Yes. The majority of unavoidable impacts are expected to result in minor temporary loss (for up to 3 years) of ABB habitat. Before minimization and mitigation measures, an estimated maximum of 13.07 acres of ABB habitat would be affected by implementation of the HCP over the 3-year life of the plan. Temporary habitat impacts would occur on up to 10.42 acres, permanent cover change impacts would occur on up to 2.65 acres, and permanent habitat losses would occur on less than 0.01 acres. Considering the small area of these habitat impacts relative to the occupied range of the species and the size of the Conservation Priority Areas, the effects to ABB would be minor or negligible. Areas of temporary and permanent cover change impacts would be restored to ABB habitat, so just 0.01 acre of permanent habitat impacts would result from implementation of the HCP.

B. Are the effects of the HCP minor or negligible on other environmental values or resources (e.g. air quality, geology and soils, water quality and quantity, socio-economic, cultural resources, recreation, visual resources, etc.) prior to implementation of the mitigation plan? (Handbook pg. 1-8 and 1-9)

Yes. Construction activities to occur in the plan area would result in temporary ground disturbance and vegetation removal. The plan area is in a landscape already heavily altered by human development, with roads, maintained right-of-ways, farmland, and pastures. Patches of forested landcover are already fragmented by existing development. Therefore, impacts to other environmental resources or values would be minor or negligible. Based on record review and field surveys, no cultural sites exist within the plan area. Any impacts to

the small wetland area in the northern end of the southern plan area would be avoided by spanning this area and avoiding any ground disturbance. Visual impacts may occur from the installation of 18 new power poles, but these impacts would be minor considering the already developed and fragmented condition of the landscape, the low density of residences in the area, and the low density of vehicle traffic on the rural roads adjacent to and near the project.

C. Would the impacts of this HCP, considered together with the impacts of other past, present and reasonably foreseeable similarly projects, not result, over time, in cumulative effects to environmental values or resources which would be considered significant? (Handbook pg. 5-3).

Yes. Within the plan area and its vicinity, the landscape is already extensively altered and fragmented from prior human development, including residences, farmland, pastures, highways, industrial sites, and power lines. Implementation of the HCP would result in less than 0.01 acres of permanent development in the plan area. The effects of this HCP are also to conserve in perpetuity 7.87 acres of undisturbed land for ABB habitat within the ABB Conservation Priority Area to offset impacts from the project. Together with revegetating areas of temporary impacts in the plan area, this off-site conservation would offset any incremental adverse effect on the human environment by preserving contiguous natural landcover. As such, the incremental impacts of the HCP, when considered together with the impacts of other past, present and reasonably foreseeable future actions would not result in a cumulative effect to the human environment which would be considered significant.

III. Do any of the exceptions to categorical exclusions apply to this HCP?

Would implementation of the HCP (refer to 516 DM 2.3, Appendix 2):

A. Have significant adverse effects on public health or safety?

No. The plan area predominantly exists adjacent to existing roads, right-of-ways, or contains land already altered by human development. Construction activities would be conducted according to standard safety protocols and best management practices, would occur over a short time period (less than one year), and are not expected to result in any significant adverse effects to public health or safety.

B. Have adverse effects on such unique geographic characteristics as historic or cultural resources, park, recreation or refuge lands, wilderness areas, wild or scenic rivers, sole or principal drinking water aquifers, prime farmlands, wetlands, floodplains, or ecologically significant or critical areas, including those listed on the Department's National Register of Natural Landmarks?

No. The plan area is in an area that is already extensively altered and fragmented from prior human development, including residences, farmland, pastures, highways, industrial sites, and other power lines. Covered activities would not result in long-term or significant effects to the limited prime farmlands that exist in the plan area, as ground disturbance would be temporary and revegetated within the permit term. Based on record searches and field surveys, no cultural resources exist in the plan area. Impacts to the small wetland feature in the southern plan area would be avoided by spanning the area to avoid any ground disturbance. Implementation of the HCP would not result in any significant impacts to natural resources or unique geographic characteristics.

C. Have highly controversial environmental effects?

No. Construction activity will be temporary and the new transmission poles will be located adjacent to existing roads and highway right-of-ways or in otherwise already human-altered landscape. The transmission line would benefit the community by meeting service demands for the City of McAlester and the Steven Taylor Industrial Park. There is no known controversy or opposition to the project.

D. Have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risks?

No. The transmission line right-of-way segments in the plan area (1.15 and 0.96 miles long each) are not unusual in any way. Installation of transmission structures (18 poles) will pose no unusual, significant or uncertain effects or risks of any kind. Construction methods employed would be routine and well established and are not anticipated to result in any unique or unknown environmental risks.

E. Establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects?

No. Implementation of this HCP employs methods, such as impact avoidance, restoring ABB habitat on disturbed sites, and mitigating for habitat impacts according to Service-established mitigation ratios, that have already been developed and employed elsewhere without significant effect. Approving this HCP will not set a precedent for future actions; future actions will be reviewed on their own merits.

F. Be directly related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant environmental effects?

No. The plan area is in an area that is already extensively altered and fragmented from prior human development, including residences, farmland, pastures, highways, industrial sites, and other power lines. As such, this line is not anticipated to result in any significant environmental effects.

G. Have adverse effects on properties listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places?

No. A search of the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) revealed no NRHP properties within the plan area and no significant cultural sites were discovered during field surveys in the plan area.

H. Have adverse effects on listed or proposed species, or have adverse effects on designated Critical Habitat for these species?

No. Impacts to the ABB from implementation of the HCP would be minor or negligible, as explained in Section II.A above. Implementation of the HCP would not have significant impacts on other listed or proposed to be listed species. No Critical Habitat is designated within the plan area. Based on the known ranges of listed and candidate species and the habitat that is present within the plan area, only the northern long-eared bat, which is listed as Threatened under the ESA, has the potential to occur. There are no known hibernacula or maternity roosts in Pittsburg County, Oklahoma. As such, this project is not located within the proposed radii for conservation measures specified under the 4(d) Rule for the species. Any take of northern long-eared bat associated with this project is exempted under the 4(d) rule. Furthermore, mist-net surveys conducted with guidance from the FWS Oklahoma Field Office in August 2015 captured no northern long-eared bats, indicating probable absence of this species in the plan area.

I. Have adverse effects on wetlands, floodplains or be considered a water development project thus requiring compliance with either Executive Order 11988 (Floodplain Management), Executive Order 11990 (Protection of Wetlands), or the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act?

No. Although there are jurisdiction wetlands and watercourses within the project area, the proposed plan will not adversely affect wetlands or floodplains and is not a water development project.

J. Threaten to violate a Federal, State, local or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment?

No. The proposed plan is compliant with all applicable federal, state, and local laws. The plan area does not include tribal land, and no covered activities are proposed to occur on tribal land.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION STATEMENT (EAS)

Within the spirit and intent of the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and other statutes, orders, and policies that protect fish and wildlife resources, I have established the following administrative record. Based on the analysis above, the AEP Talawanda to McAlester Transmission Line Project HCP qualifies as a "Low Effect" HCP as defined in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Habitat Conservation Planning Handbook (November 1996). Therefore this action as is a categorical exclusion as provided by 516 DM 2, Appendix 1 and 516 DM 6, Appendix 1 and no further NEPA documentation will be made.

Other supporting documents (list):

AEP Talawanda to McAlester Transmission Line Project Habitat Conservation Plan
AEP Talawanda to McAlester Transmission Line Project Wetland Delineation Report
AEP Talawanda to McAlester Transmission Line Project Cultural Resources Survey Report

Signature Approval:

Jonna Polk
Field Supervisor
Oklahoma Ecological Service Field Office

Date