

DECISION RECORD

for

Right-of-Way Authorization for Projects 2 and 3 of the Sterling Substation to Quartz Creek Substation Transmission Line Rebuild

NEPA Unique Identifier: 2025-0057721-NEPA-001

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (Service) accepted an application from Alaska Energy Authority on January 8, 2025, for a Right-of-Way (ROW) Transportation or Utility System permit authorization for the purpose of replacing the existing 115-kilovolt transmission line with an upgrade to a 230-kilovolt transmission line and fiber optic cable for 50-years on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). The transmission line upgrade is part of a larger electrical transmission system upgrade to improve efficiency and reliability in southcentral Alaska.

The Service's authority to accept, evaluate, and issue a decision to authorize a Right-of-Way with specific terms and conditions or to deny a Right-of-Way in response to an application for a Transportation and Utility System on the National Wildlife Refuge System is the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980, Title XI (Pub. L. 96-487; 94 Stat. 2371; 16 U.S.C. §§ 3161-3173) per 43 C.F.R. 36, and the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Pub. L. 105-57; 111 Stat. 1252; 16 U.S.C. §§ 664, 668dd, 668ee, and 1301, and 43 U.S.C. 666).

The Service evaluated the application in coordination with the U.S. Forest Service with an Environmental Assessment (EA) (2025-0057721-NEPA-001) in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), as amended (42 U.S.C. § 4321-4347), the Department of the Interior NEPA Handbook (June 2025), and the above statutory authorities.

PROPOSED ACTION

The Alaska Energy Authority proposes to replace structures and power line within the existing ROW E-48-KE between the Sterling and Quartz Creek Substations from Sterling to Cooper Landing. Approximately 22.7-miles of the total 31.2-miles of the project occur on the Refuge, starting at Three Johns Road and ending at the Chugach National Forest boundary at the Russian River. The proposed action includes siting and securing the new transmission line poles, stringing fiber optic and transmission lines onto new poles while removing the existing line, and removing existing poles. Upon completion of the upgrade, 444 existing wood poles will be replaced with 335 steel poles in addition to increased kilovolt capacity and internal monitoring allowing for continued usage of the aging transmission line. The proposed action is planned to occur from 2026 to 2028, primarily during months with frozen ground and utilizing approved staging areas. The proposed action requires continued maintenance of authorized access points and the ROW throughout the life of the permit.

PLAN CONFORMANCE

The proposed action and action alternatives assessed in the EA conform to the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) because the location of the project occurs within the existing boundaries of the current ROW, keeping the current management category of intensive management consistent with the CCP. The proposed action and alternative are in accordance with the refuge purposes described in ANILCA, Section 303(4)(B).

SELECTED ALTERNATIVE

The selected alternative is the proposed action as described above and in the accompanying Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and EA (2025-0057721-NEPA-001).

MITIGATION MEASURES

The Service's standard stipulations, terms, and conditions for Right-of-Way are incorporated into this decision per 50 C.F.R. 29.20(c) and 43 C.F.R. 36.9(b). The EA did not result in any project specific mitigation measures as described in the accompanying Finding of No Significant Impact. The proposed action included measures to avoid and minimize impacts, resulting in no additional mitigation measures during the NEPA process. The Compatibility Determination resulted in three stipulations to ensure the proposed action is compatible with the purposes of Refuge and thereby the following are incorporated as stipulations for the ROW: construction and associated staging will occur in winter conditions; maintenance within the ROW and along access routes will be consistent with existing conditions; and matting will be used for crossing wetlands if snow and ice cover is not suitable to prevent ground disturbance.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

The accompanying FONSI confirmed that the EA adequately assessed the proposed action and found it to have no significant impact, and therefore an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

Public Involvement

As described in the EA, public review and comment was held for 30 days, from June 23, 2025, to July 23, 2025. The comment period was advertised through local and statewide newspaper announcements, the Refuge website, and to landowners and community members within and near the Project area through mailed postcards. Public open houses were held for community members to attend on July 15-16, 2025. A total of two (2) comments were received from Chugach Electric Association and the State of Alaska, Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Office of Project Management and Permitting, ANILCA Program on the draft Environmental Assessment. A summary of comments received, and responses is included in Attachment 1 of Appendix A in the EA.

Coordination and Consultation

The Refuge coordinated with the Chugach National Forest in preparing a single EA and FONSI as the majority of the project is on the Refuge and Forest. The Service coordinated with the State of Alaska, Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Office of Project Management and Permitting, ANILCA Program with the draft EA and draft Compatibility Determination public comment periods, and during regular coordination and consultation meetings. The Refuge received comments from the state's ANILCA Program on the draft Compatibility Determination

and the draft Environmental Assessment. Comments were addressed and incorporated into the EA and Compatibility Determination as appropriate. The Service sent a consultation letter to the Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Office of History and Archeology, State Historic Preservation Officer on September 10, 2025, per the National Historic Preservation Act, Section 106 with a recommendation of an overall effect finding of no adverse effect per 36 C.F.R. 800.5(b).

Letters soliciting for consultation were sent to the Tribal governments, and village and regional corporations in the area in April 2024. The Kenaitze Indian Tribe responded with interest in contributing to the EA and field efforts. No other responses were received.

ANILCA, SECTION 810 SUBSISTENCE EVALUATION AND FINDING

Based on the analysis provided in the EA and an expanded in the ANILCA 810 analysis, incorporated here by reference, none of the alternatives considered would significantly reduce subsistence uses.

ANILCA, TITLE XI FINDINGS

(i) The need for and economic feasibility of the Transportation and Utility System;

The upgrade on the existing transmission line will increase carrying capacity from 115-kilovolts to 230-kilovolts and add a fiber optic cable for internal monitoring, allowing for higher voltage of electricity as part of a larger electrical transmission system upgrade to improve efficiency and reliability in southcentral Alaska.

(ii) Alternative routes and modes of access, including a determination with respect to whether there is any economically feasible and prudent alternative to routing the system through or within an area and, if not, whether there are alternate routes or modes which would result in fewer or less severe adverse impacts upon the area;

Burying the transmission line was considered in preparing the EA, but the substantial increase in cost and impacts related to habitats precluded additional analysis of this alternative. Renewal of ROWs are typically not re-routed without sufficient rationale to reduce the impacts to refuge resources and/or an economic need from the applicant. The current application and evaluation did not present sufficient justification to deviate from the current route.

(iii) The feasibility and impacts of including different Transportation and Utility System's in the same area;

The proposed action occurs within the existing ROW and is in a general transportation corridor that includes the Sterling Highway, with three locations where the line crosses the road within the boundary of the Refuge.

(iv) Short- and long-term social, economic and environmental impacts of national, State or local significance, including impacts on fish and wildlife and their habitat and on rural, traditional lifestyles;

Short- and long-term social, economic and environmental impacts of national, State, or local significance were analyzed as part of the EA. All issues with the proposed action on the short- and long-term social, economic, and environmental impacts of national, state, or local

significance are adequately addressed by standard ROW stipulations and the project specific stipulations from the Compatibility Determination.

(v) The impacts, if any, on the national security interests of the United States, that may result from approval or denial of the application for the Transportation and Utility System;

Any potential national security interests of the United States related to this proposed action or the greater transmission line in general have not been conveyed to the Service. Therefore, no impacts on national security interests are anticipated from approval or denial.

(vi) Any impact that would affect the purposes for which the Federal unit or area concerned was established;

The Compatibility Determination concluded that the proposed action would not materially interfere with the purposes for which the Refuge was established. The Compatibility Determination resulted in stipulations on timing of construction and associated staging; conditional maintenance of the ROW and access routes; and matting use for wetland crossing as necessary. The proposed action does not affect the Andrew Simons Wilderness Unit or the Mystery Creek Wilderness Unit as it and the existing ROW are located outside the Congressionally designated Wilderness areas.

(vii) Measures which should be instituted to avoid or minimize negative impacts;

All standard and project specific measures and stipulations to be instituted are identified in the Mitigation Measures section and incorporated with this Decision into the ROW.

(viii) The short- and long-term public values which may be adversely affected by approval of the Transportation and Utility System versus the short- and long-term public benefits which may accrue from such approval; and

The short-term impacts include increased noise from construction activity and impacted access to staging areas. The long-term impact of increased visual disturbance due to taller, steel poles is minimal. The long-term benefits of less total structures and decreasing risk of fire affecting poles is greater in significance. Another long-term benefit includes the contribution to more efficient and reliable transmission of publicly used power through the Southcentral region of Alaska.

(ix) Impacts, if any, on subsistence uses.

Based on the analysis provided in the EA and an expanded in the ANILCA 810 analysis, incorporated here by reference, none of the alternatives considered would significantly reduce subsistence uses.

RATIONALE

The selected alternative addresses the purpose of the EA for authorization of a ROW permit and determining if the proposed use is in the public interest by upgrading existing transmission line infrastructure that serves to transmit publicly used power efficiently and reliably from the Sterling substation located in Sterling to the Quartz Creek Substation located in Cooper Landing. The need for this action is addressed through Service's evaluation and response to the Service's evaluation and response to the proposed action. The selected alternative was preferred to the no action alternative as the existing transmission line is nearing the end of its expected lifespan. The selected alternative lowers the likelihood of catastrophic failure occurring within the ROW by

replacing the aging infrastructure and increasing carrying capacity for future transmission loads. By selecting this alternative, under the application of the Alaska Energy Authority’s proposed mitigation measures, the Service is accomplishing its mission of working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.

DECISION

After considering all relevant information raised in the NEPA and above processes, it is my decision to approve the above selected alternative with the identified mitigation measures that are added to the standard and project specific ROW terms and conditions. This decision concludes the NEPA process on the project as described above and in reference to the accompanying FONSI and EA (2025-0057721-NEPA-001).

APPEAL

The applicant can appeal a denial per Section 1106(a) of ANILCA (16 U.S.C § 3166 and 43 C.F.R. 36.8).

APPROVAL

Recommendation by

**STEPHEN
MILLER**

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Stephen Miller
Refuge Manager, Acting
Kenai National Wildlife Refuge
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

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Responsible Official

**KARLIN
ITCHOAK**

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Date: 2025.12.18 13:12:50
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Karlin Itchoak
Assistant Regional Director, National Wildlife Refuge System
Alaska Regional Office
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

12/18/25

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