FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
for
Right of Way Authorization for Projects 2 and 3 of the Sterling Substation to Quartz Creek Substation Transmission Line Rebuild
2025-0057721-NEPA-001

INTRODUCTION:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) and the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Chugach National Forest (CNF) office completed an Environmental Assessment (EA), 2025-0057721-NEPA-001, in response to a request to upgrade Alaska Energy Authority's (AEA) transmission line infrastructure within the existing transmission line right-of-way (ROW). The USFWS is the lead federal agency for this NEPA process, in accordance with U.S. Department of the Interior Handbook of National Environmental Policy Act Implementing Procedures (516 DM 1), and the USFS is a cooperating agency.

The Proposed Action consists of replacing the existing structures along approximately 31.2 miles of existing transmission line ROW (Project ROW) (22.7 miles on the Refuge and 6.4 miles on CNF), upgrading the powerline from 115 kilovolt (kV) to a 230 kV capacity, and adding a fiber optic line to the new poles to be used internally to monitor the transmission line.

The purpose of 2025-0057721-NEPA-001 is to consider a ROW authorization for the USFWS and USFS and determine if the proposed use is in the public interest by ensuring compliance with applicable regulations. The need for this action is established by the USFWS's responsibility to respond to applications for transportation and utility systems in and across, and access into, conservation system units under Title XI of Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of December 2, 1980 (P.L. 96-487; 16 USC 3161-3172; 43 CFR 36) and the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (16 U.S.C., 664, 668d and 668ee, and 43 U.S.C. 666).

Section 512 of Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 43 U.S.C. 1772, establishes the USFS authority for authorizing powerline facilities on National Forest System (NFS) lands. Special Uses Regulations, 36 CFR Part 251, Subpart B, regulations govern issuance and administration of special use authorizations for use and occupancy of NFS lands, including review and approval of proposed special use authorizations for powerline facilities in accordance with Section 512 of Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT:

Based on the review of the environmental analyses found in 2025-0057721-NEPA-001 and applicable supporting documents, we have determined that the Proposed Action is consistent with laws, regulations, and policies as described in the Environmental Assessment and will not result in significant impacts to the quality of the human environment. The Proposed Action

inherently includes measures to avoid and minimize impacts. No additional mitigation measures are required by the USFWS or USFS to ensure that the Proposed Action would not result in a significant impact to the human environment. Thus, the Proposed Action does not constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment; therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not necessary and will not be prepared.

BENEFICIAL AND ADVERSE EFFECTS

For all the resources analyzed within the Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001, adverse effects resulting from the Proposed Action would be temporary during construction. No beneficial effects are anticipated. Once construction of the powerline replacement is complete, operation of the Proposed Action would be identical to the current operating conditions. The Proposed Action would result in no significant impact, either beneficial or adverse, on the analyzed resources.

SUMMARY OF ISSUES AND ENVIRONMENTAL FINDINGS:

HABITAT AND VEGETATION

Habitat and vegetation within the study area of the Proposed Action are described and analyzed in Chapter 3.2 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issues relating to habitat and vegetation were considered:

- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect sensitive plant species?*
- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild introduce new, or spread existing, priority invasive species?*
- *Would construction of the proposed transmission line rebuild necessitate permanent removal of vegetation?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area

Habitats in the Project ROW include forests, wetlands, lakes, and rivers. Mountainous terrain and rocky slopes surrounding the Project ROW support bird and wildlife species. The Project ROW is composed of emergent herbaceous wetlands; mixed, deciduous, and evergreen forests; and mixed shrub/scrub communities. Uncommon plants collected near the Refuge include draba mustard (*Draba stenopetala*), Alaska rock-jasmine (*Douglasia alaskana*), pale poppy (*Papaver alboroseum*), yellow moosedung moss (*Splachnum luteum*), and Menzies' burnet (*Sanguisorba menziesii*). Additionally, around 100 exotic (i.e., non-native) plant species have been documented within the Refuge.

The Project ROW undergoes routine maintenance that includes vegetation clearing. Vegetation clearing typically occurs on a 7- to 10-year basis and was completed in the Project ROW in 2019 and 2020.

Short- and Long-Term Effects

Since vegetation clearing was performed in the Project ROW in 2019 and 2020, minimal additional clearing is anticipated to construct the Proposed Action. Vegetation clearing may include hand and machine practices. Debris cut down would be scattered in areas of low visual significance within the Project ROW when mechanical chipping is not feasible, as determined by maintenance staff. Stumps would be cut as low to the ground as possible. Debris stashes would be sited away from residual trees, utility poles, and streams. Post-construction, vegetation would be cleared periodically over the 31.2-mile Project ROW consistent with AEA's existing maintenance schedule. Any vegetation within the Project ROW is subject to removal or trampling. Access locations (Final EA Table 3) may require minimal vegetation removal to maintain safe access to the Project ROW.

Consistent with AEA's existing ROW permit, all mechanized equipment and vehicles accessing the Refuge from the paved highways are required to be cleaned of any attached grease and residue on wheel tracks, undercarriage, and engine. In addition, equipment shall be cleaned of all mud, dirt, and plant parts to reduce the potential for introduction of non-native and invasive plants. The spread of invasives would also be reduced by conducting construction with tracked vehicles primarily in the winter when plants are covered in snow and are less likely to become attached to equipment and vehicles. The Proposed Action would result in no significant impact on habitat and vegetation.

FLOODPLAINS

Floodplains within the study area of the Proposed Action are described and analyzed in Chapter 3.3 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issue relating to floodplains was considered:

- *Would construction of the proposed transmission line rebuild impact the existing floodplain hydrodynamics?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area

The Proposed Action area aligns with FEMA floodplain maps 0200122080A, 0200122085A, 0200122125A, 0200122150A, 02122C1360E, 02122C1380E, and 02122C1385E. Proposed Action transmission line poles would not be sited in special flood hazard areas identified in FEMA maps 02122C1360E, 02122C1380E, and 02122C1385E. Digital data is unavailable for other floodplain maps, limiting the ability to assess additional flood risks.

Short- and Long-Term Effects

During pole installation, auguring and backfilling activities could temporarily alter microtopography within the floodplain, potentially affecting natural water flow paths during spring thaw and runoff events. The use of culverts in unstable soils could mitigate

these impacts, but installation or maintenance might restrict floodwater movement or create localized ponding.

Certain segments of the Proposed Action may be constructed during spring to fall, particularly in areas accessed by helicopter. All access would be limited to existing routes, including those that traverse or are adjacent to floodplains. As a result, no new ground disturbance within floodplains is anticipated. Winter construction, the use of designated access points, existing trails, and helicopter support in challenging terrains could reduce surface disturbance within floodplains.

WETLANDS

Wetlands within the study area of the Proposed Action are described and analyzed in Chapter 3.4 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issue relating to wetlands was considered:

- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect wetlands?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area

Desktop wetland mapping was completed by professional wetland scientists for the Project ROW based on aerial signatures to identify wetlands and waterbodies. Mapped wetlands were attributed with National Wetlands Inventory mapping codes based on the USFWS Classification of Wetlands and Waterbodies. Approximately 74.6 acres (16.7 percent) of wetlands were identified out of the 447 acres mapped. Wetland types identified include palustrine forested, palustrine scrub-shrub, and palustrine emergent wetlands. An additional 6.2 acres (1.4 percent) of waterbodies were mapped. The remaining 366.2 acres (81.9 percent) were determined to be uplands.

Short- and Long-Term Effects

The Proposed Action would place a total of 42 steel poles and 34 pole anchors in less than 0.1 acre of wetlands (Final EA Table 4). Within the Refuge, 38 of these poles and 27 pole anchors are in wetlands. No poles or anchors would be placed in wetlands in the CNF. In total, less than 0.1 acre of wetlands would be converted from wetlands for the placement of poles, pole anchors, and native earth. Less than 0.1 acre of fill from the placement of poles, pole anchors, and fill material would occur in uplands.

The placement of poles and pole anchors in wetlands would disturb soils and may alter surface and subsurface flow within the areas of excavation. However, the impacts on wetlands from construction of the Proposed Action would be limited to a minimal area across a relatively long corridor. These wetlands would not become isolated, and their overall hydrologic function would not change. The Proposed Action would result in no significant impact on wetlands.

FISH AND WILDLIFE SPECIES

Fish and wildlife species within the study area of the Proposed Action are described and analyzed in Chapter 3.5 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issues relating to fish and wildlife species were considered:

- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild have direct effects on terrestrial mammals or birds (i.e., mortality, injury, stress, behavior)?*
- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect migratory birds (i.e., egg and nest destruction, loss of habitat)?*
- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect small mammal and furbearer habitat and distribution?*
- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect fish and essential fish habitat?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area

The Refuge and surrounding landscape provide diverse habitats for fish and wildlife species. Large and small mammals populate areas throughout the Project ROW, including in residential places. The Project ROW crosses lakes and anadromous rivers populated by resident and anadromous fish. Songbirds, waterfowl, and raptors are common in the area and nest in upland and wetland habitats between Sterling, Alaska, and Cooper Landing, Alaska.

USFWS and the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) have identified sensitive fish and wildlife species that may occupy habitats in and around the Project ROW (Final EA Table 5). These species include USFWS Birds of Conservation Concern and ADF&G's species of greatest conservation need.

Short- and Long-Term Effects

Terrestrial Mammals (including furbearers)

Vegetation clearing under the Proposed Action within the Project ROW would be consistent with existing conditions. Minor vegetation clearing may occur at access roads to allow for safe passage.

Noise-producing activities for the Proposed Action are limited to construction duration and maintenance. The pile driver is anticipated to produce sound levels at approximately 101 dB at 50-foot distance, and helicopter noise levels are anticipated to be approximately 90 dB at flights at 400-foot altitude. Noise at these levels and below may elicit behavioral responses in mammals. Likely behavioral responses from animals include leaving the Project ROW. Animals would likely return to disturbed areas after construction. Bear den surveys would be conducted prior to project construction. Construction would not occur near occupied bear dens to lessen the potential for disturbing hibernating bears. The Proposed Action would result in no significant impact on terrestrial mammals.

Birds

AEA would contact USFWS prior to construction to discuss all aspects of construction to determine nest survey, permit requirements, and Avian Protection Plan development under Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, 50 CFR 22.260. The USFWS Migratory Bird Permit Office will provide survey and permit requirements under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. AEA will include land managers in the correspondence to and from USFWS regarding proposed avian avoidance and minimization measures. AEA would do this coordination and consultation prior to construction.

Vegetation clearing would be done outside of USFWS avoidance windows for nesting birds to minimize impacts on birds, nests, and eggs. Vegetation clearing for maintenance of the Proposed Action would not cause a noticeable change to current conditions.

Most construction would be conducted in the winter when fewer species are present, and when nesting is not taking place. The most impactful noise-producing activities would be helicopter use, blasting, and pole installation with the pile driver. Noise from helicopters is anticipated to be below a level that could cause physical effects and would be temporary in duration due to the transient nature of helicopter use. Due to the sound levels produced from construction, the Proposed Action may result in behavioral impacts such as avoidance or masking. Birds would likely return when construction ceases in an area.

The Proposed Action would result in a net decrease in the number of pole structures in the ROW. Poles are used by birds as artificial nesting and perching habitat. The Proposed Action would result in no significant impact on birds.

Fish and Essential Fish Habitat (EFH)

The Proposed Action would result in no significant impact on fish and essential fish habitat due to the use of winter construction and measures that limit construction activities in fish habitat.

CANDIDATE, THREATENED, AND ENDANGERED SPECIES

Candidate, threatened, and endangered species within the study area of the Proposed Action are described and analyzed in Chapter 3.6 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issues relating to candidate, threatened, and endangered species were considered:

- *Does the project fall within the designated habitat of any Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed species?*
- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect these species?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area
There are no ESA-listed species with ranges or critical habitat that overlap with the Project ROW. The range of the Gulf of Alaska (GOA) Chinook Salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*), a candidate species for ESA listing, may include waters within the Project ROW.

Short- and Long-Term Effects
The Proposed Action would have no significant impact on fish, including GOA Chinook. Because construction would occur in the winter, no impact on fish habitat is anticipated. Winter crossing of frozen waterbodies would eliminate the need for construction activities to occur within GOA Chinook habitat. Erosion management measures would limit the interaction of construction activities within the GOA Chinook habitat.

GEOLOGY AND SOILS

Geology and soils within the study area of the Proposed Action are described and analyzed in Chapter 3.7 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issue relating to geology and soils was considered:

- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild result in direct loss of soil or soil erosion and runoff?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area
The geological setting includes unconsolidated surficial deposits that are generally poorly to moderately sorted and stratified. These deposits span various sedimentary environments, including alluvial, colluvial, marine, lacustrine, eolian, and swamp contexts. The landscape is shaped by extensive glacial and periglacial formations featuring end, lateral, and ground moraines; outwash plains; rock glacier deposits; and other related sediments. Bedrock surrounding the ROW is typically glacially scoured and may be overlaid by thin, glacially-derived deposits.

Short- and Long-Term Effects
Construction would primarily occur during frozen conditions; however, limited activities may also take place during spring to fall in certain areas, such as near the Quartz Creek Substation or where helicopter access is utilized. Access would occur along existing routes except where new access trails were created in November 2025 so that geotechnical work between the Kenai and Russian Rivers would avoid archaeological sites. These new access trails will continue to be used to avoid disturbance to archaeological sites for any future work.

Winter construction conditions would help minimize soil disturbance and reduce the risk of soil compaction and erosion. During spring melt, previously compacted snow and ice may increase surface runoff and potentially mobilizing loose soils. Sediment and erosion control measures would be implemented to minimize sedimentation in nearby streams. Construction activities, including the use of heavy machinery and access routes, could

temporarily disrupt surface soils; however, wood mats and erosion and sediment control measures would be used to limit impacts to soils.

Blasting and drilling for hard rock removal would only be conducted when necessary and primarily during winter construction; however, these activities may still result in localized soil disturbance, including fracturing surface and surface soils, potentially affecting soil structure and increasing the risk of erosion once thawing begins.

Implementation of best management practices and the applicant proposed mitigation measures identified in Section 2.3 of the EA will limit project impacts. The Proposed Action would result in no significant impact on geology and soils.

AIR QUALITY

Air quality within the study area of the Proposed Action is described and analyzed in Chapter 3.8 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issue relating to air quality was considered:

- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect air quality?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area

While air quality in the Kenai Refuge is generally excellent, it can be influenced by a combination of natural and anthropogenic sources. Transportation emissions, particularly from vehicles travelling on the Sterling Highway and surrounding local roads, contribute to ambient concentrations of carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, volatile organic matter, and particulate matter.

During winter months, residential heating results in elevated levels of particulate matter and combustion-related emissions. Wildfires are another significant contributor to air quality variability with the potential to produce sustained increases in particulate matter.

Short- and Long-Term Effects

The construction of the Proposed Action could introduce temporary air quality impacts. Construction activities and equipment potentially could generate temporarily elevated levels of fugitive dust and localized emissions. The applicant proposed practices of working in winter and using dust suppression techniques would minimize the potential effects. The Proposed Action would result in no significant impacts on air quality.

WATER RESOURCES

Water resources within the study area of the Proposed Action are described and analyzed in Chapter 3.9 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issues relating to water resources were considered:

- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect water quality?*
- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect local hydrology?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area

The Proposed Action area crosses Lily Lake, East Fork Moose River, Jean Creek, Kenai River, Cooper Creek, Russian River, and several unnamed ponds and seasonal drainages. The Kenai River flows approximately 82 miles from Kenai Lake to its mouth at Cook Inlet, and its watershed encompasses about 2,200 square miles.

During the winter low-flow conditions, streamflow is predominantly sustained by groundwater inputs. In contrast, high streamflow associated with rainfall, snowmelt, and ice melt introduces suspended sediments, particularly in glacier-fed streams during mid to late summer. These streams often exhibit high turbidity downstream due to glacial silt, while streams influenced by runoff outside of heavy precipitation periods tend to maintain water clarity. Similarly, the Kenai River's turbidity increases as it flows downstream from Kenai Lake to Cook Inlet; therefore, turbidity near the Project ROW is generally low. No impaired waterbodies have been identified in the Alaska Department of Conservation's 2024 Integrated Quality Monitoring and Assessment Report in the Project ROW.

Short- and Long-Term Effects

To avoid direct disturbance, waterbody and river crossings would be limited to periods when they are frozen. Construction activities including pole installation, access road use, and equipment staging could introduce temporary impacts on water quality in nearby water bodies, including the Kenai and Russian rivers. Potential risks such as increased sedimentation, turbidity from soil disturbance, runoff containing construction-related pollutants, and changes to local hydrology would be avoided due to the frozen conditions limiting soil erosion and runoff. Wood mats and erosion and sediment control measures would be used to limit impacts to water resources. The applicant proposed mitigation measures are identified in Section 2.3 of the EA. The Proposed Action would result in no significant impact on water resources.

SOUNDSCAPE

The soundscape within the study area of the Proposed Action is described and analyzed in Chapter 3.10 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issue relating to the soundscape was considered:

- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect local noise levels?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area

The soundscape varies throughout the Project ROW with human-generated noise primarily limited to roadways, trails, waterbodies, and residential areas near the Project ROW. Road traffic (Sterling Highway), airplanes, and snowmachines make up the majority of the noise associated with machines and technology. Seasonal changes in noise sources occur near the Project ROW due to the use of snowmachines in the winter.

Short- and Long-Term Effects

Noise produced from the Proposed Action would be temporary and mostly limited to the winters of 2026 to 2027 and 2027 to 2028 and maintenance periods. Construction and maintenance equipment may result in localized and temporary instances of noise exceeding background levels. Construction would move along the Project ROW over the life of the Project and would not generate noise in a single area for an extended period. Noise producing activities during maintenance of the Proposed Action area are anticipated to be similar to current conditions. Flight restrictions near mountain goats and Dall sheep outlined in the EA will provide assurances that impacts from helicopters are minimized. The Proposed Action would result in no significant impact on the soundscape.

DESIGNATED WILDERNESS

Designated wilderness within the study area of the Proposed Action is described and analyzed in Chapter 3.1.4.3 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issue relating to designated wilderness was considered:

- *Would the construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect any areas of designated wilderness?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area

The project would occur entirely with existing ROW with a portion of the ROW located within/adjacent to designated Wilderness. The 1.35-million-acre Kenai Wilderness was created by the passage of ANILCA. The Kenai Wilderness is subdivided between three units: Mystery Creek (46,068 acres), Dave Spencer (187,106 acres), and Andrew Simons (1,086,216 acres). Mystery Creek Wilderness Area is the only wilderness area located within the project area.

Short- and Long-Term Effects

The Proposed Action, occurring within an existing ROW, would result in no change to special land status designations.

CULTURAL AND HISTORIC RESOURCES

Cultural and historic resources within the study area of the Proposed Action are described and analyzed in Chapter 3.11 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issue relating to cultural and historic resources was considered:

- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect existing cultural resources within the project area?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area

To identify cultural resources, surveys and testing were conducted in 2023 and 2024 of the 100-foot-wide Project ROW as well as a 50-foot buffer. As of 2025, 22 Alaska Heritage Resources Survey (AHRS) sites have been identified within the 100-foot-wide ROW, with two additional AHRS sites within the 50-foot buffer area. These site types include historic mining features, one traditional cultural place, sites relating to transportation and power transmission infrastructure, and sites that contribute to the Sqilantnu Archaeological District (KEN-00156/SEW-00282). Seven of these sites have been determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), including four sites that contribute to the Archaeological District. Three additional sites have been determined ineligible for the NRHP, and the remaining sites remain unevaluated. For a more detailed site inventory, see Hosken et al. (2023).

One Revised Statute 2477 Trail (RST), the Stetson Creek Trail (RST 619), intersects the ROW (ADNR 2017). This trail is also listed in the AHRS database as SEW-00868.

Short- and Long-Term Effects

All known cultural resource sites within the study area will be avoided by Project activities, with one exception: one pole structure will be placed on the exterior boundary of a site within the Sqilantnu Archaeological District. However, the proposed pole structure encroaches only slightly into the edge of the site boundary and avoids any impacts on known features within the site. Additionally, AEA will flag this and all site boundaries within the ROW to ensure that no vehicles traverse the sites, and contractors will be advised to exercise added caution when working at this pole structure location and in the vicinity of any flagged sites within the ROW.

AEA is developing an Inadvertent Discovery Plan for cultural resources and human remains to address the possibility that undocumented site may exist within the transmission line ROW. The Inadvertent Discovery Plan establishes the procedures to be followed if construction activities unexpectedly encounter cultural resources or human remains. Furthermore, the Inadvertent Discovery Plan lays out the chain of required notifications to verify that inadvertent discoveries are managed as effectively and expeditiously as possible.

Construction activities for this project are planned to occur primarily during winter when there is snow coverage, and the ground is frozen. This will further protect known,

and as yet unidentified, cultural resources from impacts related to vehicles transversing the ROW.

- **Avoidance:** The following sites will be flagged for avoidance. No new poles are proposed within the boundaries of the known sites along the Project ROW, with one exception (see Minimization measures below). These sites will be flagged to ensure that no vehicles traverse the sites, and the construction crews will have access to the ROW through previously established access routes:
    - KEN-00282[1]
    - KEN-00294
    - KEN-00301
    - KEN-00759
    - SEW-00748
    - SEW-00750
    - SEW-00755
    - SEW-01776

- **Minimization measures:** One new pole is proposed within the boundary of site SEW-00753. The pole is anticipated to encroach slightly into the edge of the northwest boundary of SEW-00753. However, any ground disturbance associated with the installation of the pole will be located over 50 meters from any known features within the boundary of the site. To further avoid impacts to this site, the site will be flagged, and contractors will be advised to exercise added caution when working at this pole structure location.

The Proposed Action would result in no significant impacts on cultural resources and historic properties.

LOCAL AND REGIONAL ECONOMIES

Local and regional economies within the study area of the Proposed Action are described and analyzed in Chapter 3.12 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issue relating to local and regional economies was considered:

- *Would construction and operation of the proposed transmission line rebuild create effects on local and regional economies?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area

The tourism and seafood/fishing industries of the Refuge are the largest contributors to the Kenai Peninsula Borough economy. Visitors are also drawn to the CNF for its fishing, and many other activities such as hiking, walking, and wildlife viewing. Total spending by

[1] Adverse effects to properties that contribute to the Sqilantnu Archaeological District (KEN-00156/SEW-00282) could also result in adverse effects to the District as a whole.

visitors to the CNF is approximately $34.3 million annually. The CNF is used to harvest timber products, while water resources within CNF lands support municipal, industrial, aquaculture, and thermoelectric needs. CNF provides access for commercial development and hobby use of mineral resources.

The industries that employ the most people in Cooper Landing are accommodation and food services; arts, entertainment and recreation; real estate, rental, and leasing; and transportation and warehousing. The industries that employ the most people in Sterling are management occupations; office and administrative support; education instruction and library occupations; and health treatment services. In the Kenai Peninsula Borough in general, the largest employing industries are management occupations; office and administrative support; construction and extraction occupations; and education instruction and library occupations.

Short- and Long-Term Effects

Under the Proposed Action, there may be a temporary increase in money flowing to local businesses in the Cooper Landing and Sterling area due to construction worker needs during the construction window. Money spent on maintenance of the Proposed Action is not anticipated to be more than current maintenance requirements.

The transmission line infrastructure in the Project Area is aging, and there is a threat of a critical failure to the transmission line between Sterling and Cooper Landing. In the event of transmission line failure, local and regional economies that rely on the transmission line may be affected as businesses become temporarily closed or services are slowed or halted until the power failure is repaired. The Proposed Action would result in no significant impact on local and regional economies.

SUBSISTENCE USE

Subsistence use within the study area of the Proposed Action is described and analyzed in Chapters 3.12.1 and 3.15.1 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issue relating to subsistence use was considered:

- *Would the construction and operation of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect access to or abundance of subsistence resources?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area

Hunting and trapping opportunities for several species are available for federally-qualified subsistence users within the Refuge in general proximity along the transmission line. Black bear, brown bear, caribou, coyote, hare, lynx, wolverine, grouse, ptarmigan, Dall sheep, goat, and moose are among the species harvested in the area. Several federal subsistence fishing opportunities are provided within the Refuge. Although the Kenai and Russian Rivers support subsistence fishing, the Proposed Action construction would occur outside of peak spawning and subsistence use period.

Short- and Long-Term effects

The Proposed Action would not impact subsistence uses or detract from subsistence needs being met because effects on wildlife or habitat resources would not be significant, and availability or resources for subsistence uses would not be reduced. The Proposed Action would not increase competition for resources among users. The Proposed Action would not change the availability of resources by altering their distribution or location. Finally, the Proposed Action would not reduce subsistence uses and opportunity for such uses because of limitations on access to harvestable resources. The Proposed Action would not result in a significant possibility of a significant restriction on subsistence uses.

PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY

Public health and safety within the study area of the Proposed Action are described and analyzed in Chapter 3.13 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issues relating to public health and safety were considered:

- *Would construction of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect roadway safety?*
- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect recreationists' safety?*
- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect low-level air travel?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area

West of existing Structure 12-5, the ROW can be accessed by snowmachines via existing trails originating at the Sterling Highway, though east–west movement within the ROW is limited by steep terrain.

Short- and Long-Term Effects

Potential hazards include increased construction traffic along the Seward and Sterling highways, which could increase the risk of vehicular accidents, including vehicle-strike wildlife mortalities, particularly in areas with limited visibility or challenging winter conditions. The use of heavy machinery, potential blasting activities, and helicopter operations could introduce effects on construction crews and the public. The Proposed Action's taller steel pole structures may require guy wires for stability, particularly in areas with high winds or heavy snow loads, which could potentially introduce effects on recreators, including snowmachiners, traveling along power line corridors. However, more guy wires would be removed from the existing structures than installed on new structures. The Proposed Action would result in no significant impact on public health and safety.

REFUGE RESOURCES

Refuge resources within the study area of the Proposed Action are described and analyzed in Chapter 3.14 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issue relating to Refuge resources was considered:

- *Would construction and operations of the proposed transmission line rebuild affect recreation access along the project area?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area

The Refuge hosts approximately one million visitor use days annually, and approximately 1.2 million people drive through the Refuge each year. Visitors commonly visit the Refuge for freshwater fishing; waterfowl, upland game, and big game hunting; hiking; wildlife observation; photography; environmental education and interpretation; canoeing; camping and public use cabins; and the visitor center and historical sites. Access to the Refuge near the Project ROW is provided at a variety of locations including several pullouts for trails, water access, and viewpoints along the Sterling Highway, Jean Lake Campground, Mystery Creek Road, and Kelly Lake Road.

Short- and Long-Term Effects

Noise-producing activities during the construction and maintenance phases of the project may impose impacts on visitors and detract from the visitor use experience. The pullouts and gravel pad at Mystery Creek Road provide parking access to the Refuge and may remain desirable parking locations during construction. Staging in these areas may limit Refuge visitor use by reducing the available parking at trailheads and viewing locations in the Refuge. Construction activities are planned to occur primarily during winter corresponding with lower visitor use. Noise and parking related impacts on visitor use and experience within the Refuge would result in no significant impact on Refuge resources.

CNF RESOURCES

CNF resources within the study area of the Proposed Action are described and analyzed in Chapter 3.15 of Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. The following issues relating to CNF resources were considered:

- *Will the proposed action have an effect on visitor experience?*
- *Will the proposed action impact Forest aesthetics and visual resources?*

Characteristics of the Geographic Area

The USFS has recommended the lower Russian River as suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System; however, Congress has not acted on this recommendation.

The Project ROW lies within CNF Kenai Peninsula Geographic Area. The Kenai Peninsula Geographic Area is managed to accommodate high levels of human use, while maintaining its natural-appearing character.

Short- and Long-Term Effects

Proposed Action construction would require construction vehicles to be operated in the Project ROW through CNF. Construction equipment would result in noise impacts and has the potential to detract from the aesthetic value of the CNF landscape. Construction is anticipated to cease prior to sockeye fishing on the Russian River so that it would not interfere with recreational fishing. The Stetson Creek parking lot would be used as a staging area during times that would conflict with visitor use, which may limit visitor access to CNF. The Pink Salmon Parking Lot would be used when the Russian River Campground is closed to visitors. Visitors use the Russian River Campground Road for cross country skiing when the campground is closed during the winter. AEA would be instructed to allow space for parking at each staging area so that CNF access is not blocked off altogether at any location. The presence of equipment and infrastructure would reduce parking potential and may make access to CNF more competitive. If parking lots fill up from the combination of visitor vehicles and construction equipment during construction, visitors may not be able to access desired locations in CNF.

Construction may limit access to the segment of Russian Lakes Trail south of where it crosses the Project ROW, which includes USFS cabins access, for the one to two days construction would be occurring in this location. Access may be limited to where the Stetson Creek Trail crosses the Project ROW for the two to four days construction is anticipated to occur in this area. AEA would coordinate with USFS on appropriate measures for visitor safety and trail access at these locations. The Proposed Action would result in no significant impacts on CNF resources.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

The Alternative Action considered was the No Action Alternative. Under the No Action Alternative, USFWS evaluated the effects of not issuing a ROW Permit to rebuild, upgrade, and maintain the transmission line on the refuge. Power transmission infrastructure would remain in its current state within the transmission line corridor between Sterling and the Quartz Creek Substations. The transmission line is aging and has the potential to fail under the No Action Alternative. In the event of failing infrastructure, the transmission line may result in loss of electricity and may require increased unplanned maintenance, such as vegetation clearing within the ROW, tracked vehicles within the ROW, and helicopter use, outside of current plans and schedules to repair infrastructure.

MITIGATION MEASURES

The USFWS and USFS accept all mitigation measures the applicant proposes as part of the proposed action to minimize project impacts. For a full description of all proposed mitigation

measures, please refer to Section 2.3 of the EA. No additional mitigation measures to the proposed action are imposed by the USFWS or USFS.

AGENCIES AND PERSONS CONSULTED

USFWS is the lead agency and USFS is the cooperating agency for Environmental Assessment 2025-0057721-NEPA-001. Other state, federal, and local agencies consulted included tribal governments.

In compliance with EO 13175, Consultation and Coordination with Indian Tribal Governments, federal agencies are required to consult with federally recognized tribal governments during the NEPA process. USFWS identified tribal governments potentially affected by the project. Letters were sent to four identified tribal governments in April 2024 inviting them to consult on this project. The following tribes were contacted:

- Ninilchik Native Association
- Ninilchik Village
- Port Graham Corporation
- Port Graham Village
- Salamatof Native Association
- Salamatof Village
- Seldovia Native Association
- Seldovia Village Tribe
- Tyonek Native Corporation
- Village of Nanwalek
- Village of Tyonek
- Cook Inlet Region, Inc. (CIRI)
- Kenaitze Indian Tribe

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The draft environmental assessment was available for public review and comment for 30 days, from June 23, 2025, through July 23, 2025. Members of the public were notified of the availability of the draft documents by publication in the Anchorage Daily News and the Peninsula Clarion; the notification was also posted on the Refuge website, and landowners and community members potentially affected by the Proposed Action were notified of the draft document and public meetings via mailed postcards. The draft document was also made available at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge headquarters and was available as a downloaded document from the Refuge website at: https://fws-fileshare.box.com/s/xyc2l47omxg901lva9b2ubwvza3s4oga

Public open houses for the Sterling to Quartz Creek Transmission Line Project were held on July 15, 2025, at the Sterling Community Center, and on July 16, 2025, at the Cooper Landing Community Club. No written comments were submitted at either meeting; however, two

entities, Chugach Electric Association and the State of Alaska Department of Natural Resources, provided written comments to the Refuge Manager at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Written comments received were related to construction activity timing, clarification of transmission line structure and guard structure specifications, and clarification of the status of the lower Russian River as suitable for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

USDA FOREST SERVICE DECISION NOTICE AND PRE-DECISIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW (OBJECTIONS)

This FONSI functions as a Decision Notice (7 CFR 1b.6(c)). The USDA Forest Service Responsible Official (Chugach Forest Supervisor) has decided to implement the proposed action on National Forest System lands administered by the Chugach National Forest. The decision is based on review of the environmental analysis, FONSI, and project record. The Chugach Forest Supervisor finds that implementing the proposed action meets the purpose and need, and it is consistent with the Chugach Land Management Plan. The project is subject to pre-decisional administrative review pursuant to 36 CFR 218. A 30-day public review and comment period was held, and because no specific written comments were received on the USFS's proposed actions, the decision was not subject to objections.

CONCLUSION

Based on the review of the environmental analyses found in 2025-0057721-NEPA-001, and applicable supporting documents, we have determined that the Proposed Action will not result in significant impacts to the quality of the human environment. Thus, the proposed action does not constitute a major federal action having a significant effect on the human environment; therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement is not necessary and will not be prepared.

KARLIN ITCHOAK

Digitally signed by KARLIN ITCHOAK
Date: 2025.12.18 13:15:10 -09'00'

Karlin Itchoak, USFWS, Assistant Regional Director – Refuges, Alaska Region

Date

Digitally signed by JENNIFER YOUNGBLOOD
Date: 2025.12.19 08:19:57 -09'00'

12/19/25

Jennifer K. Youngblood, USFS, Forest Supervisor – Chugach National Forest

Date