

APPENDIX C

High Energy Cost Grant Program

2025 Environmental Questionnaire

Overview

The USDA Rural Utilities Service (RUS) is required to assess the potential impacts of proposed federal actions, including the provision of financial assistance through the High Energy Cost Grant Program (HECG), to the human environment in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), and other federal, state, and local environmental laws. HECG applicants must complete and submit this Environmental Questionnaire (EQ) with their applications for financial assistance. This EQ provides information to RUS so that RUS can either complete the environmental review process or determine the appropriate level of additional impact analyses need in accordance with RUS Environmental Policies and Procedures, 7 CFR § 1970 at <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/subtitle-B/chapter-XVIII/subchapter-H/part-1970>. RUS will notify applicants if additional information or analyses are necessary beyond what is submitted in the EQ.

No construction activities may begin until final environmental approval from RUS is granted.

In accordance with 7 CFR § 1970.12, awardees are prohibited from taking actions that may have an adverse environmental impact or limit the choice of practicable alternatives that may be considered until RUS has concluded the environmental review process. If the proposed project involves construction activities or property acquisition, the applicant is generally prohibited from acquiring, rehabilitating, converting, leasing, repairing, or constructing property or facilities, or committing or expending Agency or non-Agency funds until after RUS has concluded its environmental review requirements.

An applicant may submit to RUS a copy of any environmental review document that has been prepared in connection with obtaining permits, approvals, or other financing for the proposed project from state, local or other federal agencies. Such material, to the extent determined to be relevant, may be used to fulfill RUS environmental review requirements. Applicants shall not reference items provided in other parts of the application package in the EQ; all materials relevant to the EQ must be integrated herein to facilitate timely review.

Requested Information

A. Project Description and Location: Reviewers must make findings and determinations based on geographically based site conditions. Complete descriptions, locations, and mapping must be provided for each site affected by project-related construction activities. Photographs, site plans, or aerial images may also be useful to the reviewer. If there are multiple geographic locations within the proposal, environmental review information must be provided separately for each individual location. Reviewers may not be experts in the project field and information should be presented and described in a manner accordingly.

- Provide a concise project description. What is proposed? Will the project involve the construction of a new facility, an upgrade/replacement of an existing or both? For upgrades/replacements, will the proposal be in or on the same footprint as the existing facility? What are the dimensions of facilities/installations?
- Include information on the area to be disturbed including the area footprint (acres, sq. feet), dimensions (length, width, and depth of line, trenches, or boreholes, height of poles, depth of excavation, etc.), construction methods, whether disturbance is temporary or permanent, whether tree clearing/trimming and/or routine vegetation management is required.
- Include right of way (ROW) dimensions or dimensions for the area where project activities will take place.
- Include information on the schedule and timing of construction.
- **Include the location of the project.** Location information needs to allow someone unfamiliar with the area and project to locate the proposed project, more than just the county. Provide information on project location and maps, including KMZ files, USGS and topo maps. Include latitude/longitude coordinates, address, intersection, county, borough, or census area, or other location description.
- The use of digital mapping is highly encouraged. Applicants may submit project information as KMZ files from Google Earth or similar web-based programs or GIS Shapefiles if your organization uses Geographic Information System software (GIS). If an applicant cannot provide digital maps RUS recommends U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) 7.5-minute quadrangle maps at a map scale of 1:24,000; larger scale maps may be provided for site-specific proposals. USGS maps may be obtained and purchased

on the USGS [Maps | U.S. Geological Survey \(usgs.gov\)](https://www.usgs.gov/maps). The project locations must be clearly indicated on any maps submitted for review. Maps must include a scale, north arrow, and legend.

B. Land Ownership and Use:

- a. Describe the amount of property to be cleared, excavated, fenced, or otherwise disturbed by the proposed project.
- b. Describe the current land use and zoning for each project site affected by construction.
- c. Determine land ownership and provide a point of contact (POC) for landowners other than private holdings. Note: all roads and associated rights-of-way (ROW) traversing federal lands are normally controlled by the federal land managing agency. Generally, land managing agencies have a realty POC and a NEPA/Section 106 POC. Provide all POC's to RUS.
 - Federal Publicly managed lands (i.e., BLM, National Parks, Forest Service, USACE)
 - Private inholding in federally managed lands
 - Tribal
 - State

Information related to federal lands can be found online at ArcGIS [Account Login - ArcGIS Online](https://www.arcgis.com/account) or USGS National Map [Topographic Maps | U.S. Geological Survey \(usgs.gov\)](https://www.usgs.gov/maps). Tribal lands managed by Bureau of Indian Affairs can be found at [Indian Lands \(geoplatform.gov\)](https://www.geoplatform.gov/)

C. Farmlands: Farmland Protection Policy Act (FPPA) is intended to minimize the impact Federal programs have on the unnecessary and irreversible conversion of farmland to nonagricultural uses.

1. Determine whether the project may irreversibly convert farmland (directly or indirectly) to nonagricultural use in accordance with the FPPA [Farmland Protection Policy Act | Natural Resources Conservation Service \(usda.gov\)](https://www.usda.gov/land-conservation/farmland-protection-policy-act). Project site(s) within incorporated city limits do not need to be evaluated for the FPPA.
2. Use the mapping tools of the Web Soil Survey (WSS) to determine if a project is located on soils classified as important farmland (prime, unique, or of statewide importance) [Web Soil Survey - Home \(usda.gov\)](https://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov/)
3. If a project has the potential to convert soils identified as important farmland consultation with the local USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office must be completed. Send Form AD-1006 to the appropriate state soil

scientist within NRCS. The list of state soil scientists within NRCS is found at this link: <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/conservation-basics/natural-resource-concerns/soils/state-soil-scientists>.

- i. Complete parts I and III of Form AD-1006, available online at the FPPA link above, then send to the NRCS.
- ii. If the NRCS completes parts II, IV, and V, then complete parts VI and VII. If the NRCS only completes Part II, then the form is completed.
- iii. Criteria for Part VI are found at 7 CFR § 658.5 are also found at the link above.
- iv. Submit the final completed form to the appropriate local NRCS office.
- v. Include consultation results.

D. Wetlands:

- a. Identify whether wetlands are present on or near the site(s) affected by proposed construction (maps of wetlands may be obtained from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Wetland Inventory (NWI) website available online at [Wetlands Mapper | U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service \(fws.gov\)](#) The presence of hydric soils may also indicate wetlands; consult the NRCS WSS [Web Soil Survey - Home \(usda.gov\)](#) for hydric soil data.
- b. **Include the wetland map(s)** with the project location(s) clearly indicated. NWI maps are a gross indicator, so if it appears wetlands are present, and project design or routing cannot avoid them, a wetland delineation should be conducted. Results of the delineation and a concise project description are provided to the nearest U.S. Army Corps of Engineers office (Regulatory Branch) with a request for a preliminary jurisdictional determination and associated permit requirements. Additional guidance can be found in Subpart G of RUS's instructions. See link in the Resources Section of this document.

Note: For most projects involving buried cable, applicants may be able to utilize a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Nationwide Permit. The permit numbers have changed so contact the Regional USACE Office for details. [React App \(army.mil\)](#).

E. Floodplains:

- a. Review Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM), available at [FEMA Flood Map Service Center | Welcome!](#)
- b. Describe and indicate whether any facility(ies) or site(s) are located within the 100 and or 500-year floodplain.
- c. **Include the floodmap(s)** with the project location(s) clearly indicated.

Note: Applicants with projects in areas unmapped by FEMA should refer to RUS instructions Subpart F or contact RUS for further guidance on determining flood risk.

F. Coastal Areas:

- a. Determine whether the project is within the boundaries of a coastal zone management area (CZMA). See National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management's website - [NOAA Office for Coastal Management | States and Territories Working on Ocean and Coastal Management](#) for CZMA boundary and contact information.
- b. If the project falls within a CZMA contact the state's Coastal Zone Management Program to determine if a Federal Consistency Determination will be required. Some states and territories (such as Alaska) do not participate in this program.
- c. If required, initiate Consistency Determination process with the state.
- d. Provide the determination with the EQ or once available.

NOTE: the Great Lakes have coastal zones.

G. Protected Species:

1. Applicants must obtain an official species list from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS), available from the Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) website. [IPaC: Home \(fws.gov\)](#). Get the official list by logging into the IPaC website. The unofficial list will have a "not for consultation" watermark on it and cannot be used.
2. Determine whether listed resources will be exposed to the proposed action or to any of the environmental changes that are likely to occur due to the project.
3. Compare potential project impacts to appropriate species information (i.e. habitat requirements, species threats).
4. Describe whether any proposed project site(s) and activities will directly or indirectly affect:
 - a. Any threatened, endangered or candidate species, or
 - b. Is within or near designated critical habitat as designated under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Note: beneficial, insignificant, or discountable effects must be considered and disclosed

The preferred source for information and technical assistance is the local USFWS Field Office website, online listing available at [Our Regions | U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service \(fws.gov\)](#). Additional guidance can be found in Subpart N of RUS's instructions.

H. Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Review:

Section 106 requires federal agencies to initiate consultation with the appropriate State Historic Preservation Officer/Tribal Historic Preservation Officer and other consulting parties, identify historic properties, assess effects to historic properties, and, if needed, resolve adverse effects. To carry out this process, the applicant must provide the following to RUS:

- a. The proposed area of potential effect (APE) pursuant to 36 CFR §800.16(d) and a cultural resources literature review, together with a recommended finding of effect for the project.

RUS defines the area of potential effect (APE) as an area that includes all Project construction and excavation activity required to construct, modify, improve, or maintain any facilities; any right-of-way or easement areas necessary for the construction, operation and maintenance of the Project; all areas used for excavation of borrow material and habitat creation; all construction staging areas, access routes, utilities, spoil areas, and stockpiling areas. Impacts that come from the undertaking at the same time and place with no intervening causes are considered “direct” regardless of its specific type (e.g., whether it is visual, physical, auditory, etc.) “Indirect” effects to historic properties are those caused by the undertaking that are later in time or farther removed in distance but are still reasonably foreseeable.

The cultural resources literature review should be completed by Secretary of the Interior (SOI) qualified staff. If you do not have SOI qualified individuals on staff, you can hire a Cultural Resources Management (CRM) firm with SOI qualified staff to complete the work on your behalf. A list of CRM firms can usually be found by contacting the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) in your respective state. The National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers provides a directory of SHPOs online at [Directory | NCSHPO](#).

- b. As described in Section B, identify the types of land encompassed within the project area (i.e., Tribal, federal, state, private, etc.) and any known easements, rights-of-way, or other encumbrances. If any portion of the project is on federal, Tribal or state lands, provide a point of contact (POC) for each to RUS, as applicable. Determine if any portion of the project is on Federal lands, and if so, you must coordinate with the cultural resources staff or archaeologist for the federal area to ensure that Section 106 is done in cooperation with RUS and consistent with the timing of funding requirements and construction. Provide the point of contact (POC) to RUS.
- c. A list of Tribes that may have an interest in the project using the US Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) Tribal Directory Assessment Tool (TDAT) at [TDAT \(hud.gov\)](#). Please note that RUS must make a reasonable and good faith effort to identify Tribes that may

attach religious and cultural significance to historic properties that may be affected by the project even if it does not occur on Tribal lands.

NOTE: For Projects in Alaska please follow the special instructions on the TDAT site.

[TDAT \(hud.gov\)](https://tdat.hud.gov) Click MENU and find **Special Instructions for Alaska** in the drop-down menu.

- d. The completed Environmental Questionnaire is an essential component of the application for a High Energy Cost Grant; an application will be deemed incomplete if it does not include a complete EQ and will not be reviewed or scored. In the event an applicant is a selected finalist for award, the completed EQ will be submitted to an identified intake portal from where an SOI qualified RUS staff member will be assigned to your project and will work with you and or your CRM consultant to complete the Section 106 process

Additional Assistance/Contact Information

Rural Development's Regulations and staff Instructions may be found at [eCFR :: 7 CFR Part 1970 - Environmental Policies and Procedures](#). This includes all the Subparts mentioned in the text of this document.

In addition to the resource specific references provided above, general NEPA related information and guidance can be found on both the CEQ [NEPA | National Environmental Policy Act \(doe.gov\)](#) and the EPA [National Environmental Policy Act | US EPA](#).

EPA's NEPAAssist Tool [NEPAAssist | US EPA](#) can be used to generate maps and or reports that provide much of the data required to complete this questionnaire.

National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 Implementing Regulations, "Protection of Historic Properties" can be found at 36 CFR §800.

For information related to Section 106, see the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation [An Introduction to Section 106 | Advisory Council on Historic Preservation \(achp.gov\)](#)

Please direct any questions regarding the environmental review process to 202-692-4910.