High Energy Cost Grant Program

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 Part 1970. RUS's entire regulation, subparts, guidance and templates can be found online at https://www.rd.usda.gov/publications/regulations-guidelines/instructions scroll down to PART 1970: ENVIRONMENTAL. 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:

- Provide a concise project description. Include area to be disturbed (acres, sq. feet, previously disturbed or undisturbed), dimensions (length of line,

height of poles, depth of excavation, etc.), and what is proposed. New facility or an upgrade/replacement? If the latter, will it be in or on the same footprint as the existing facility?

- **Include the location of the project**, either lat/long, address, intersection or description. Location information needs to allow someone unfamiliar with the area and project to locate the proposed project, more than just the county.
- 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.
- The use of digital mapping is highly encouraged. Applicants may submit project information as Keyhole Markup Language (KML) or Shapefile (SHP). If an applicant cannot provide digital maps RUS recommends U.S. Geological Survey 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 https://www.usgs.gov/products/maps/overview.

B. Land Ownership and Use:

1. Describe the amount of property to be cleared, excavated, fenced, or otherwise disturbed by the proposed project.
2. Describe the current land use and zoning for each project site affected by construction.
3. Determine land ownership and provide a point of contact for land owners other than private holdings. Note: all roads and associated right-of-ways (ROW) traversing federal lands are normally controlled by the appropriate federal agency
    - Federal Publicly managed lands (ie BLM, National Parks, Forrest Service, USACE)
    - Private inholding in federally managed lands
    - Tribal
    - State

Information related to federal lands can be found online at ArcGIS http://arcg.is/0OC9Sv or USGS National Map https://nationalmap.gov/small_scale/mld/fedlanp.html. Tribal lands managed by Bureau of Indian Affairs can be found at https://nationalmap.gov/small_scale/mld/indlanp.html

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

(https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/landuse/fppa/).

2. Use the mapping tools of the Web Soil Survey (WSS) https://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov to determine if a project is located on important farmland (prime, unique, or of statewide importance)
3. If a project has the potential to convert important farmland consultation with the local USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office must be completed.
    i. Complete Parts I, V, and VI of Form AD-1006, available online at https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1045394.pdf
    ii. Criteria for Part VI are found at 7 CFR 658.5 https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?SID=63f5083e8993ba642eab888a9ccc585f&node=7:6.1.3.6.28.0.13.5&rgn=div8
    iii. Submittal the completed form to the appropriate local NRCS office
    iv. Include consultation results

D. Wetlands:

1. 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 https://www.fws.gov/wetlands/). The presence of hydric soils may also indicate wetlands; consult the NRCS WSS https://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov for hydric soil data
2. **Include the wetland map(s)** with the project location(s) clearly indicated.
3. NWI maps are a gross indicator, so if it appears wetlands are present, and project design or routing cannot avoid them, a 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.
4. Additional guidance can be found in Subpart G of RUS's regulation (https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/1970g.pdf)

Note: For most projects involving buried cable, applicants will be able to utilize the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Nationwide Permit Number 12, Utility Line Activities.

E. Floodplains:

1. Review Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM), available at https://msc.fema.gov/portal.

2. Note: Applicants with projects in areas unmapped by FEMA should refer to § 1970.257(c)(5), https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/1970f.pdf or contact RUS for further guidance on determining flood risk.
3. Describe and indicate whether or not any facility(ies) or site(s) are located within the 100 and 500-year floodplain.
4. **Include the floodmap(s)** with the project location(s) clearly indicated.

F. Coastal Areas:

1. Determine whether or not 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 - https://coast.noaa.gov/czm/mystate/ for CZMA boundary and contact information
2. 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
3. If required, initiate Consistency Determination process with the state.
4. Provide the determination with the EQ or once available.

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 https://ecos.fws.gov/ipac/
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 https://www.fws.gov/ecological-services/map/directory.html

Additional guidance can be found in Subpart N of RUS's regulation (https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/1970n.pdf)

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

1. Determine whether the project will cause any effects to any historic properties eligible for listing or listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) https://www.nps.gov/nr/research/.
2. Determine whether the project will cause any effects to any known archeological sites and NRHP listed or eligible resources. Information can be obtained from 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 http://ncshpo.org/directory/.
3. As described in section B, applicants must also indicate if any portion of the project is located on tribal lands (lands within the exterior boundaries of any Indian reservation and all dependent Indian communities). Information regarding historic properties located on tribal lands may be obtained from the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO) or the tribe's official representative for historic preservation. A listing of designated THPOs can be obtained through the US Housing and Urban Development's (HUD)Tribal Directory Assessment Tool (TDAT) available online at https://egis.hud.gov/tdat/Tribal.aspx

Additional Assistance/Contact Information

In addition to the resource specific references provided above, general NEPA related information and guidance can be found on both the CEQ https://ceq.doe.gov and the EPA https://www.epa.gov/nepa. For information related to Section 106, see the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation http://www.achp.gov/docs/CitizenGuide.pdf.

Please direct any questions regarding the environmental review process to 202-205-9805.

10/17/2017