



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Region 1
490 N. Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

**Decision Notice
and
Finding of No Significant Impact
for
Interbel Telephone Cooperative's Easement and
Fiber Optic Cable Upgrade through Woods Ranch WMA
Environmental Assessment**

May 28, 2010

Description of Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to establish a formal agreement with Interbel Telephone Cooperative (Eureka, MT) for a utility easement for existing and future communication cables across the Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The easement would allow the Cooperative the ability to replace an existing underground copper wire system with a new underground fiber optic cable. The new cable would follow existing and abandoned roadways within the WMA along its entire length.

Background

A county road historically traversed the Woods Ranch WMA prior to its acquisition by the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers in 1978. Beginning in about 1964, Interbel Telephone Cooperative used the county road right of way for overhead communication lines for area residences. These were later replaced by underground copper wire systems that also followed the right of way of the old county road. Records on file at the Clerk and Recorder's Office in Libby indicate the road traversing the WMA was formally abandoned on January 4, 1968.

Recent efforts to identify or locate an existing utility easement between Interbel Telephone Cooperative and past landowners or FWP have been unsuccessful. Given what appears to be the lack of an existing easement, Interbel Telephone Cooperative is hoping to formally correct this matter by purchasing a utility easement across the Woods Ranch WMA that would follow abandoned and existing roadways and existing underground cables. This easement would be 13,051 feet long, 15 feet wide, and encompass 4.494 acres. The value of this easement has been estimated at \$17,976.

Once an easement has been formally obtained, Interbel Telephone Cooperative would like to install a new fiber optic cable the length of the entire easement. The cable will be buried to a depth of 36" using a vibrating plow mounted on a caterpillar-type tractor. The underground disturbance will be approximately 4" wide, while an area approximately 4-5' wide will be disturbed at the surface along the entire length of the proposed underground cable. Assuming a 5' wide disturbance area over the entire length of 13,051 feet, a maximum of 1.5 acres will

be disturbed. Surface areas disturbed by activities will be seeded with a perennial grass mixture. Once the fiber optic cable is installed, the existing underground copper cables will be abandoned in place. Benefits of this proposed action include improved communications (phone and internet) with residents living east and south of the WMA.

Alternatives

Following are brief descriptions of the two alternatives that were developed in the EA:

Alternative A (No Action)

Failure to approve a formal utility easement with Interbel Telephone Cooperative would force them to seek alternative routes, probably from the Indian Creek area and across large tracts of private land. This would be prohibitively expensive and probably more damaging to the environment. The current copper wires have limited band width and are becoming "filled" and antiquated. Decreases in service quality to area residences would be inevitable.

Alternative B (Proposed Action)

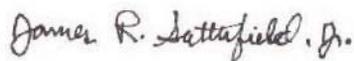
FWP's proposal to grant approval of the utility easement and installation of the fiber optic cable through Woods Ranch WMA paralleling an existing, underground cable is the most practical, economical, and beneficial (to area residences) option available. By following existing and abandoned roadways, it is also the option that is least likely to be detrimental to the environment.

Public Comment

Public comment was solicited from May 4 through May 19, 2010. Only two comments were received, and both were in favor of the proposed action.

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

Based on analysis in the EA, I find Alternative B to be the preferred alternative. I have evaluated the EA and applicable laws, regulations, and policies, and have determined that this action will not have a significant impact on the human or physical environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. The final EA may be viewed at or obtained from Montana, Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 490 North Meridian Road, Kalispell, MT 59901.



James R. Satterfield, Jr., Ph.D.
Regional Supervisor

May 28, 2010
Date