

**Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)
Environmental Assessment on the
Alaska Power and Telephone
Extension of Service to Dyea, Alaska**

The National Park Service (NPS) has prepared an environmental assessment (EA) on issuing a permit to the Alaska Power and Telephone Company (AP&T) to install, operate, and perform continued routine maintenance on a 7.2 kilovolt single phase underground power line and a 50-pair telecommunications cable in the Chilkoot Trail Unit of Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park (the park) in Skagway, Alaska. The right-of-way permit for a 10 foot right-of-way will be granted along existing gravel and paved roads that cross National Park Service (NPS) lands and provide access to private land within and adjacent to the park.

The purpose of the proposed project is to provide reliable electrical power and telecommunications service to property owners in the Dyea area, some of whom are within Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park boundaries, and all of whom reside within the Chilkoot Trail and Dyea National Historic Landmark. Property owners in Dyea (including the NPS) currently rely on diesel generators for their electrical needs and unreliable radio phones for communication. Diesel generators produce noise and exhaust emissions including nitrous oxides, carbon monoxide, and hydrocarbons. The proposed AP&T power line extension will not only provide reliable telecommunication and electrical services to the residents of Dyea, it will also result in the reduction of noise and exhaust emissions associated with diesel generator use.

The AP&T project has been permitted by the State Department of Transportation and Public Facilities (Permit Number 3-299520-02-13, dated April 8, 2002) for portions of the project that will occur within the State road right-of-way. The lines will cross properties of various ownership, including State of Alaska, City of Skagway, NPS, and private entities (see project area map included in the EA). The project area within federally owned lands is located in Township 27S and Range 59E, Sections 15 and 22, CRM (Copper River Meridian) beginning north of the Taiya River bridge on the State Route 299520.

The section of the underground power line and telecommunications cable to be permitted by the NPS will run from the north side of the Taiya River Steel Bridge and terminate at the south end of the West Creek Bridge (approximately one mile in length). From this main line, underground lines will also extend to several parcels of private property. These sections of the utility easement occur on lands managed by the NPS. The work will consist of excavation of a trench parallel to and immediately adjacent to the existing roadways using a small track hoe or a Case 580 backhoe and a small Cat for cleanup. Trenching will occur generally within 40 feet of the centerline of the roads. The trenches will be approximately 1-2 feet wide, and 3-4 feet deep. The underground lines will be installed on the west side of Dyea Road for the southern 9/10 of the project area and on the east side of the road for the northern portion.

Cable junction pedestals that are 36 inches by 36 inches by 36 inches and are painted munsel green (dark green) per National Electrical Manufacturers Association (NEMA) standards will be installed at approximately 8 locations in the road corridor. The project proposal indicates that no base units/transformers will be installed on federally owned lands. Installation of the power line will occur in the fall of 2002 and require 4-5 weeks for completion. The underground lines that will be used are a filled-cable with water blocking to prevent damage if lines become submerged during flooding. The expected lifespan of such lines is 25 years. Routine maintenance will involve only the pedestals and will not require excavation or work on the buried lines. The potential for damage to underground lines will be highly unlikely from natural events but possible from human error (i.e., excavation with heavy equipment for unrelated projects).

Public Involvement

The EA had a 30-day public comment period beginning July 26, 2002 and ending August 24, 2002. The park mailed the EA to approximately 20 agencies, organizations, and individuals, and provided the EA through the park's web page, at park headquarters, and by telephone request. The park distributed a press release on June 22, 2002 to the local radio station (KHNS), public library, and post office, and placed an advertisement in the local newspaper (The Skagway News), to run on June 26, 2002, announcing the comment period and document availability. The park also conducted an open house at the Chilkoot Trail Outpost in Dyea, Alaska, on July 25, 2002. Copies of the EA were available for distribution at the open house, and members of the park staff were present to answer questions and provide information.

Comments were received from State of Alaska's Division of Governmental Coordination. They had no objections to the proposed action and stated that an Alaska Coastal Management Program review was not required.

Alternatives

The EA evaluated two alternatives, the Preferred Alternative and a No Action Alternative. Under the No Action alternative Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park would not issue the right-of-way permit to AP&T; therefore, power and telecommunications services would not be extended to the Dyea area.

Mitigation Measures

Mitigation to be taken in conjunction with implementing the NPS preferred alternative include:

Soils and Water Resources: Silt fences will be required for excavation (during initial construction and subsequent maintenance activities) immediately adjacent to the Taiya River and West Creek to control erosion/sedimentation and protect water resources.

Cultural Resources: An NPS cultural resource specialist will be present throughout the installation of the power line to ensure that important cultural resources are not impacted. Should unknown resources be uncovered during the implementation of ground disturbing activities within the project areas, work will be stopped in the discovery area, and the NPS will consult according to 36 CFR 800.11 and, as appropriate, provisions of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1992. Any artifacts recovered from park property will be accessioned, cataloged, preserved, and stored in compliance with NPS-28.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

The no-action alternative is the environmentally preferred alternative because no excavation or vegetation clearing would occur under this alternative. However, the no-action alternative is environmentally preferred over the park's preferred alternative by only the smallest of margins. The proposed actions will occur within a previously disturbed road corridor, which minimizes the resulting environmental impacts. Continued use of diesel-powered generators under the No Action Alternative would continue local impacts from small fuel spills, air pollution from diesel exhaust, and noise.

Environmental Consequences of Preferred Alternative

As documented in the EA, the NPS has determined the preferred alternative can be implemented with no significant adverse effect to natural soundscape, vegetation, soils, wildlife, recreation/visitor use, park

operations and management, visual quality, air quality, and the National Historic Landmark. The environmental effects of the preferred alternative are summarized below.

Natural Soundscape

The natural soundscape in the park will be impacted to a minor degree in the short-term (up to 5 weeks) by noise associated with installation and construction of the lines. Dyea residents will likely switch to quieter hydro-electric services, thus improving the area's natural soundscape. Because the existing noise from the generators is intermittent, occurs mainly during the summer, and affects a relatively small area close to the generators, the virtual elimination of this noise will be considered a minor long-term benefit on the natural soundscape.

Vegetation

Primarily exotic and highly disturbed vegetation (grasses and forbs) will be lost within approximately one linear mile not to exceed 40 feet in width either side of the center line, paralleling the Dyea Road. Given the previously disturbed nature of the site, it is unlikely that the proposed action will alter the structure or composition of the vegetative community present. Future maintenance of the lines could also result in negligible impacts to roadside vegetation if vegetation is cleared to access the pedestals. Altogether, because the affected area is small and already greatly disturbed, and because thousands of acres of high quality, native vegetation will remain intact, adverse impacts on vegetation will be negligible both in the short-term and long-term.

Soils

Although ground disturbance will occur (approximately one linear mile not to exceed 40 feet in width, paralleling the Dyea Road), adverse impacts to soils in the project area will be negligible over both the short-term and long-term for several reasons. Significant erosion is unlikely given the relatively flat topography and lack of steep slopes on this river terrace site. Off-road vehicle use is common on unofficial trails that parallel the Dyea road. This recreational off-road vehicle use, as well as on-going road maintenance activities have already greatly compacted and otherwise disturbed soils in the project area.

Wildlife

Adverse impacts on wildlife from the proposed actions will be negligible and short-term. Wildlife occurring in the area such as river otter, red squirrel, black bear, grizzly bear, bald eagle, varied thrush, common raven, chestnut-backed chickadee, northern goshawk, weasel, sapsucker, and rodents could be temporarily displaced from the project area while construction is occurring (up to 5 weeks). Existing disturbance from diesel generators will likely diminish once AP&T supplied electricity is available and residents switch to this power source. The temporary nature of the potential impacts to wildlife will result in negligible, adverse, localized impacts to wildlife. The nature of these impacts will not result in the impairment of park resources and values associated with this topic.

Recreation/Visitor Use.

Visitors to the park will be impacted by noise and inconvenience associated with installation of the power line; however, these effects will be negligible and short-term (the 5 weeks of construction) as work will be scheduled in the fall when visitation is low. Work within the park will not result in traffic delays, but noise and the visual perturbation associated with excavation could detract from the visitor's experience of the park briefly as they travel the Dyea road. Construction will occur after the peak summer visitation season, so fewer numbers of visitors will be affected. Long-term minor benefits to recreation/visitor use will result from the diminished use of diesel generators in the park as residents switched to cleaner, quieter, hydro-electric power.

Park Operations and Management

Park operations and management will benefit from the extension of power and telephone to Dyea. This new power source will be much more reliable, clean, quiet, and easy to use than current diesel generators and propane powered appliances. Likewise, the potential for diesel fuel spills will be diminished. Similarly, park communications will be greatly improved with the availability of improved telecommunications services (telephones and computers). With the improvement of communications in Dyea, the NPS could ensure greater safety and service to park visitors. Reliable power and phone will also improve the efficiency of NPS staff in maintaining NPS facilities.

Visual Quality

Short-term effects to the visual quality of the project area will occur during placement of the underground power line. On-going maintenance of the power line will likewise affect the visual quality of the project area. The long-term impact (i.e., the visual impact of the above-ground pedestals and distribution closures) will be minimized by the relatively small size of these features (making them easily concealed by vegetation) and the green color (providing camouflage). Because the lines will be placed underground in a previously disturbed area adjacent to the existing road, impacts to the visual quality of the project area will be negligible.

Air Quality

Local air quality will be affected by the limited use of motorized tools and heavy equipment to excavate the trench; however, these negative impacts will be negligible because they will occur only for short periods of time during the 4 to 5 week construction period. Local air quality could potentially be improved if Dyea residents change from diesel generators to hydroelectric power because airborne pollutants will be reduced.

National Historic Landmark

The Dyea and Chilkoot Trail National Historic Landmark will be affected by the above-ground placement of pedestals and distribution closures. Short-term effects, including temporary disruption of the soundscape, temporary displacement of wildlife, short-term disturbance of the vegetation due to ground disturbance in the immediate area, and temporary disruption of the recreational/visitor use by noise and inconvenience, will occur during installation of the underground lines. On-going maintenance of the power line will likewise affect the National Historic Landmark. The long-term impact (i.e., the visual impact of the above-ground pedestals and distribution closures) will be minimized by the relatively small size of these features (making them easily concealed by vegetation) and the green color (providing camouflage). Because the lines will be placed underground in a previously disturbed area adjacent to the existing road, impacts to the Dyea and Chilkoot Trail National Historic Landmark will be negligible.

Decision

The National Park Service's decision is to select the preferred alternative which will involve issuing a permit to the AP&T to install, operate, and perform continued routine maintenance on a 7.2 kilovolt single phase underground power line and a 50-pair telecommunications cable in the Chilkoot Trail Unit of Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park (the park) in Skagway, Alaska. This decision includes mitigating measures on cultural resources, soils, and water resources as identified in this FONSI.

Rational for the Decision

The preferred alternative will improve park operations, air quality, visitor use, natural soundscape, and human safety conditions in the Dyea area and the Chilkoot Trail Unit of Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park. AP&T's extension of power and telecommunications service to Dyea will have minor, adverse, short-term, localized effects on park resources and values due to the noise and disturbance

associated with construction. However, the long-term effects will be beneficial. The AP&T power and telecommunications extension will not only provide reliable telecommunication and electrical services to the residents of Dyea, it will also result in the reduction of noise and exhaust emissions associated with diesel generator use.

The levels of adverse impacts to park resources anticipated from the preferred alternative will not result in an impairment of park resources that fulfill specific purposes identified in the establishing legislation or that are key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park.

Though it is the environmentally preferred alternative, the No Action was not selected for implementation, because it would not meet the purpose of the project as described above.

The Preferred Alternative complies with the Endangered Species Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the Alaska Coastal Management Act, and Executive Orders 11988 and 11990. There will be no significant restriction of subsistence activities as documented by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Title VIII, Section 810 (a) Summary Evaluation and Findings.

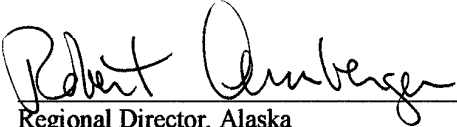
I find that the Preferred Alternative does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 and regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality (40 CFR 1508.9), an environmental impact statement will not be prepared for the project.

Recommended:

Acting 
Superintendent, Klondike Gold Rush
National Historical Park

8/30/2002
Date

Approved:


Regional Director, Alaska

9/4/02
Date