

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
Bureau of Land Management
Palm Springs – South Coast Field Office
1201 Bird Center Dr.
Palm Springs, CA 92262

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
for Morongo Canyon at Highway 62
Multi-Tenant Wireless Broadband Communications Site

DOI-BLM-CA-D060-2020-0005-RMP-EA
CACA053787 (Legacy)
CACA105877335 (Mineral and Land Record System)

INTRODUCTION

The United States (U.S.) Department of the Interior (DOI), Bureau of Land Management (BLM) prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA), DOI-BLM-CA-D060-2020-0005-RMP-EA, for the construction and operation of a multi-tenant wireless communication facility at Morongo Canyon 0.5 miles northwest of California State Highway 62 in San Bernadino County, California. This Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) applies to Alternative D, the reduced view alternative, located at Site 2¹, as described in Section 2.5 of the EA. Alternative D includes communication site development, right-of-way (ROW) authorization, and a BLM land use plan amendment (LUPA) to accommodate the proposed use; these are collectively referred to as the Project.

Alternative D would involve issuing a lease for communication site use covering 1.2-acres of BLM-administered land for the construction, operation, and maintenance of the facility and associated infrastructure. Within the lease area, the communication facility footprint encompasses 8,000 square feet (0.18 acres), and the new ROW measures 50 feet wide by 790 feet long (1.02 acres).

Alternative D includes installing the following infrastructure within the 1.2-acre lease area:

- One three-legged, 196-foot-tall, freestanding, self-supporting lattice communication tower on top of a 23-foot triangular base and a 38- by 38-foot, 6-foot-deep concrete foundation.
- Two 20- by 40-foot (800 square feet each) equipment buildings to accommodate up to five carrier tenants.

¹ NE1/4NW1/4SW1/4 and NE1/4SW1/4 of Section 32, Township 1 S, Range 4 East, San Bernardino Meridian, California.

- Backup generator and propane fuel tank
- Motorola R56 Design Standard chain-link fencing (gray) or equivalent measuring 8 feet high, with three strands of barbed wire on the top, bringing the total height of the fencing to 9 feet. Desert tortoise fencing consisting of galvanized hardware mesh of 1- by 2-inch dimensions would be attached to the lower 18 inches of the chain-link fencing and buried to a 12-inch depth or bent outward and secured to the ground.
- A new 20-foot-wide and 790-foot-long gravel access road with up to 30 feet of cut and fill, including drainage, on either side (but primarily on the south side); the corridor would also include up to one turnout. Utility infrastructure, including electric power lines, fiber-optic lines, and a transformer, would be buried within a 10-foot utility easement within and adjacent to the access road within the ROW. Steep terrain and road alignment challenges would be addressed by developing an engineered road design that complies with BLM and San Bernardino County Fire Protection District Fire Code standards.
- A 12-foot-wide entrance gate 10 feet from the entrance to the new access road off Canyon House Road.

Design features incorporated in Alternative D include the conservation and management actions (CMAs) and best management practices (BMPs) contained in Appendix D, Applicant-Proposed Measures, of the EA.

Alternative D also would amend, via a LUPA, the BLM's 1980 California Desert Conservation Area Plan,² as amended by the BLM's 2016 Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Area Plan LUPA,³ to modify Site 2 (1.2-acres) from Visual Resource Management (VRM) Class II to VRM Class III.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on my review of the attached EA and supporting documents, I have determined that Alternative D (the reduced view alternative), including the CMAs and BMPs contained in EA Appendix D, will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not required. This finding is based on the degree of the effects described in the following sections within the identified affected environment.

Potentially Affected Environment

i. Biological Resources

Mojave yucca scrub dominates the sparsely vegetated study area, an ecological transitional zone between chaparral and desert. Vegetation communities within the area are detailed in Figure 3-3

² United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management. 1980. The California Desert Conservation Area Plan. California Desert District, Moreno Valley, California.

³ United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management. 2016. Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Plan Land Use Plan Amendment to the California Desert Conservation Area Plan, Bishop Resource Management Plan, and Bakersfield Resource Management Plan. Internet website: https://eplanning.blm.gov/public_projects/lup/66459/133474/163144/DRECP_BLM_LUPA.pdf.

of Appendix E, Biological Evaluation Report, of the EA. During biological surveys, several common plant and wildlife species were observed, and special status plant and wildlife species were identified as potentially occurring within the biological study area. A full list of plant and wildlife species observed during the biological surveys can be found in Appendix E. Noxious and invasive weed species were also documented during the biological surveys.

ii. Cultural Resources

A Class III cultural resource inventory was conducted in 2016, with additional surveys conducted in 2025, to identify historic properties within the area of potential effect (APE) that could be impacted by the alternatives considered in the EA, including Alternative D. Public comments received on the draft EA indicated that previously undocumented cultural resources exist either within the APE or within 1 mile of the APE. No historic-age built-environment features or archaeological sites of prehistoric or historic association were encountered within or immediately surrounding the APE during the 2016 or 2025 field work.

The BLM has consulted and continues to consult with Tribal Nations about this Project, informing nine tribes of the Project and of the intent to prepare this EA. In response to a request for government-to-government consultation, a meeting was held on August 14, 2019. Multiple tribes requested a visit to the Project site, and BLM invited all nine previously notified tribes to a site visit on January 30, 2025. No areas of cultural or religious significance to the tribes have been identified. Refer to EA Chapter 3, Section 3.2, Cultural Resources, and Chapter 4, Tribes and Agencies Consulted, for additional details.

iii. Soil Resources

The portion of San Bernardino County surrounding the Project site lacks complete U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service data, though soil mapping for the nearby Coachella Valley area are available. The soils at the Project site do not support wetlands and are not considered prime farmland. Desert pavement and biological soil crusts have not been inventoried in the Project area, but they have the potential to occur. Soils at the Project site are likely to have high wind erosion susceptibility and moderate water erosion susceptibility.

iv. Recreation

The Project site is within the Sand to Snow Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA), managed to preserve the nationally significant biological, cultural, educational, geological, historic, scenic, wilderness, and recreational values. More common activities in the Sand to Snow SRMA are hiking, wildlife and wildflower viewing (particularly birds), primitive camping, equestrian use, sightseeing, hunting, photography, picnicking, and stargazing.

v. Special Area Designations

The Project site (Site 2) is 0.48 miles southeast of the San Gorgonio Wilderness, which lies within the Sand to Snow National Monument and was designated by Congress in 1964 under the Wilderness Act. In addition to the four core qualities of wilderness character, cultural features are identified as a supplemental value to be managed.

vi. Noise

The residence closest to the Project site (Site 2) is 0.15 miles away. Both the Project site and

nearby residences are within a rural high desert community where typical ambient noise levels are expected to be approximately 45 A-weighted decibels during the day and 34 A-weighted decibels at night. Peak-hour noise levels would be slightly elevated at Site 2 because it is closer to Highway 62. Ambient noise levels at the San Gorgonio Wilderness boundary 0.48 miles from Site 2 are expected to be within the range of 26 to 40 dBA.

vii. Visual Resources

Site 2 and the surrounding lands are noted for their adjacent scenery and variety of landforms, which are key factors contributing to the area's scenic quality. Much of the surrounding land is undeveloped, except for Highway 62 to the east and the community of Morongo Valley to the northeast. The BLM rates Site 2 and surrounding lands as having high visual sensitivity. This is because of their proximity to sensitive user areas, such as the San Gorgonio Wilderness and the Pacific Crest Trail. The 2016 Desert Renewable Energy Conservation Area Plan LUPA assigned Site 2 and surrounding lands as VRM Class II so they would conform to the management objectives of the Sand to Snow SRMA, which Site 2 is within. Visual contrast rating worksheets and visual simulations were completed to determine whether the Project would be visible from key observation points and to determine whether the Project would conform with VRM class objectives.

Degree of Effects

As detailed in Chapter 3 of the EA, Alternative D could impact the above-identified seven resources. After considering the analysis in Chapter 3, however, potential adverse impacts were determined to be avoided or minimized to less than significant through the incorporation of the CMAs and BMPs included in EA Appendix D. For visual resources, a LUPA changing Site 2 from VRM Class II to VRM Class III is necessary to achieve no significant impacts related to the Project. Short-term effects would take place during the anticipated 90-day construction period (EA Appendix B, Plan of Development), while long-term effects would take place over the life of the ROW lease. The following have been considered in my evaluation of the selected alternative:

i. Short- and long-term effects; Beneficial and adverse effects

a. Biological Resources

Short-term adverse impacts on plant and wildlife species may occur because of construction and maintenance activities. For plant species, this includes destruction of individuals and soil disturbances, as well as increased runoff, sedimentation, and erosion. Short-term adverse impacts on wildlife include injury; death; displacement; degradation of habitat; and becoming trapped inadvertently, such as inside equipment or holes (EA Chapter 3, Section 3.1.2).

Long-term adverse effects could include the spread of noxious and invasive weed species in the area due to ground disturbance and increased access. The removal of native habitat (long term and adverse) would also decrease foraging habitat available for wildlife species that use the biological study area to forage. Motorized use on and around linear transportation features would have long-term adverse impacts on vegetation, and the development of a gravel access road could encourage increased access to the area. In the long term, communication towers are known to pose a collision hazard to birds and bats in flight, which is related to tower height, design

(such as guy wires), lighting, and siting relative to migratory bird and bat concentration areas. Long-term effects on desert tortoises (if present) could occur from raven predation because the tower structure would provide perches for ravens (EA Chapter 3, Section 3.1.2).

CMAAs and BMPs (EA Appendix D) would avoid or minimize adverse effects on plants and wildlife. EA Appendix E specifies measures that would be taken during project implementation, as well as a bird and bat conservation strategy. The CMAAs (EA Appendix D) require conducting preconstruction surveys and establishing protective buffers for special status plant species, managing invasive and noxious weeds, implementing desert tortoise avoidance and protection measures, implementing predator and raven management measures, avoiding vegetation removal during the peak breeding bird season or preconstruction nest clearance surveys, establishing protective buffers for active bird nests, using daily BLM-approved biological monitors to oversee construction activities, and developing a bird and bat conservation strategy plan. Guidance from the U.S. DOI, Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) regarding communication tower site BMPs for construction, siting, and design⁴ would be incorporated into all phases of the Project, where applicable, to reduce the risk of bird mortality within the Project's footprint. Implementation of these BMPs, CMAAs, and USFWS guidance would minimize adverse effects on biological resources (EA Chapter 3, Section 3.1.2).

b. Cultural Resources

No short- or long-term effects on historic properties are anticipated from the Project because no historic-age built-environment features or archaeological sites of prehistoric or historic association were encountered within or immediately surrounding the APE during surveys.

There remains short-term potential for inadvertent discoveries during construction because of ground-disturbing construction activities. A discovery could constitute an adverse effect on a historic property (a permanent impact) under the National Historic Preservation Act (EA Chapter 3, Section 3.2.2). To avoid this, measures in EA Appendix D include requiring a BLM-approved cultural resource monitor be present during any ground-disturbing activities, as well as developing, in advance of any construction, an inadvertent discovery plan detailing actions to be taken in the event of a discovery.

c. Soil Resources

Development within the 1.2-acre Project site, including associated access road construction and use, would impact surface soils through grading and leveling. Short-term adverse effects on soils from construction include compaction and/or disturbance of the ground surface, decreasing water infiltration and increasing erosion potential. Steep terrain and road alignment challenges would be addressed by developing an engineered road design that complies with BLM and San Bernardino County Fire Protection District Fire Code standards. Adverse effects on soil resources would be limited through the implementation of BMPs, such as development of a stormwater pollution prevention plan, which are detailed in EA Appendix D. The measures listed in EA Appendix D also include relevant CMAAs from the 2016 Desert Renewable Energy

⁴ United States Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service. 2021. Recommended Best Practices for Communication Tower Design, Siting, Construction, Operation, Maintenance, and Decommissioning. Migratory Bird Program.

Conservation Area Plan LUPA that are designed to protect water quality by limiting soil erosion. Implementation of these BMPs and CMAs would reduce the adverse effects of construction on soils by reducing the amount of disturbance and the transport of soil material off-site via water or wind.

d. Recreation

In the short term, there would be sights and sounds associated with Project construction that could adversely affect visitors in nearby areas that are currently used for dispersed and undeveloped recreation. In the short term, portions of the 1.2-acre ROW under active construction would also be inaccessible to the public. In the long term, the Project would disturb up to 1.2 acres in this area and render the 0.18-acre fenced footprint inaccessible to the public. Development of the Project would not block or hinder access to recreation in either of the two recreation management zones within the Sand to Snow SRMA where all developed or designated hiking, wildlife viewing, and any other primary activities are provided for (EA Chapter 3, Section 3.4.2).

The Project would be managed in accordance with CMAs in EA Appendix D, that broadly apply to the Project and that would reduce adverse impacts on the SRMA related to biological, cultural, and visual resources. Implementation of these measures would ensure no significant adverse impacts on the SRMA.

e. Special Area Designations

The Project would not be in the San Gorgonio Wilderness; therefore, it would not adversely affect the following qualities of wilderness character: untrammeled, natural and undeveloped, and supplemental values associated with cultural features (EA Chapter 3, Section 3.5.2).

Short-term construction noise levels associated with the Project would exceed the existing noise level range by at least 8 A-weighted decibels at the San Gorgonio Wilderness boundary and would be within the existing noise level range within the San Gorgonio Wilderness (because ambient noise levels are expected to be 26 to 40 A-weighted decibels). The noise impacts at the San Gorgonio Wilderness boundary could result in annoyance and be considered adverse if anyone desiring solitude is at the boundary during construction. However, the adverse impacts due to construction would be short term and intermittent (EA Chapter 3, Section 3.5.2). Accordingly, these impacts are not considered significant.

Long-term, routine operations would be within the existing noise level range at the San Gorgonio Wilderness boundary and within the San Gorgonio Wilderness. However, in the event of power grid failure, all four generators could be required to operate during nighttime hours. This would exceed the existing noise level range by at least 1 A-weighted decibel at the San Gorgonio Wilderness boundary and would be within the existing noise level range within the San Gorgonio Wilderness. This long-term impact from nighttime operation noise could result in annoyance and be considered adverse if anyone desiring solitude is at the wilderness boundary during this time of night. However, the impact would be intermittent and rare (EA Chapter 3, Section 3.5.2). Accordingly, these impacts are not considered significant.

f. Noise

During construction, noise levels at residences would exceed San Bernardino Development Code Noise Standards for Stationary Noise Sources by 4 A-weighted decibels during the day; however, the Development Code exempts construction activities from the noise standards from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., except on Sundays and federal holidays. These short-term (during the 90 days of construction) and intermittent noise impacts on residences could result in annoyance and be considered adverse (EA Chapter 3, Section 3.6.2).

Typical operation, including generator use, and maintenance noise would be occasional and would not exceed San Bernardino Development Code Noise Standards for Stationary Noise Sources. Typical operations would also be within the existing noise level range for the San Gorgonio Wilderness boundary and San Gorgonio Wilderness. However, in the case of power grid failure, generators could be required to operate during nighttime hours. Although this operation would still meet San Bernardino Development Code Noise Standards for Stationary Noise Sources, it would exceed existing ambient noise levels by 7 A-weighted decibels. The impacts of this intermittent nighttime operation noise on residences could result in annoyance and be considered adverse. However, the impact would only take place from when power is lost until power is re-established. The intensity of the impact would depend on a variety of factors, including the time of night that the noise occurred and the activity of residents at that time.

Where noise may impact wildlife, CMAs in EA Appendix D would be implemented. These CMAs include using noise controls on standard construction equipment, including mufflers, to reduce noise and using engineering controls on stationary equipment, buildings, and work areas, including sound insulation and noise enclosures, to reduce the average noise level, if the activity would contribute to noise levels above existing ambient levels. Using these controls would further reduce potential effects from construction, operations, and maintenance noise on sensitive receptors described above; accordingly, these adverse impacts are not considered significant.

g. Visual Resources

Long-term adverse effects include visibility of the Project access road from the connection point at Canyon House Road, which would briefly be seen by motorists traveling this route. The proposed access road could also be visible from two private parcels that are 0.2 miles south of the proposed access road alignment. Long-term adverse effects also include visibility of the communications tower. Due to the proposed position of the tower on the skyline, implementation of BMPs would not be able to effectively reduce the contrast into VRM Class II conformance. Because the structure would moderately change the form and line of the landscape and would attract some attention from a casual observer, the view from some key observation points would not meet the VRM Class II's objectives after application of BMPs (EA Chapter 3, Section 3.7.2). Therefore, Alternative D includes a LUPA to change Site 2 (1.2 acres) from VRM Class II to VRM Class III.

A LUPA would allow for the development of the Project on undeveloped BLM-administered land. This Project would be the first development on the undeveloped lands and as such, the potential exists that Alternative D would serve as a precedent that could minimize barriers to future development or encourage consolidation of future development in the area because the area would no longer be characterized as undeveloped. Additional future development outside of

the Project ROW would affect scenic quality and be subject to VRM Class II objectives and could require another LUPA (EA Chapter 3, Section 3.7.2).

Because the BLM is considering the Project in part due to the safety needs of the community and travelers within the Highway 62 corridor, it is anticipated that the community's wireless broadband service needs would be met by the Project, and future communication towers in the vicinity would not be necessary. Therefore, it is not expected that any additional future development immediately in and around the Project site would involve a communication tower (EA Chapter 3, Section 3.7.2).

Given the potential long-term adverse effects on scenic quality, sensitive viewers, and nonconforming views, BMPs from the "Common Elements" section of the Best Management Practices for Reducing Visual Impacts of Renewable Energy Facilities on BLM-Administered Lands⁵ would be incorporated into Project design (EA Chapter 3, Section 3.7.3). These BMPs would minimize the visual contrast created by the Project, and in combination with the LUPA that would change the Project site from VRM Class II to Class III, the visual impacts described above would not be significant.

ii. Effects on public health and safety

Public health and safety were considered but not carried forward for detailed analysis in the EA because the Project involves a communication facility with no hazardous materials, emissions, or activities that would pose a significant risk to public health or safety (EA Chapter 3, Table 3-1). The BLM determined that CMAs and BMPs in EA Appendix D would reduce potential impacts related to public health and safety (such as fugitive dust and fuel spills) below the level of significance, including reducing the potential for fire.

The Project would result in expanded wireless service coverage and capacity, including internet, along Highway 62 throughout the Morongo Grade. This is anticipated to improve emergency services response time and reduce the likelihood of mortality or property damage associated with disabled vehicles along Highway 62. Accordingly, the impacts on public health and safety are long term and beneficial.

iii. Economic effects

Socioeconomics were considered but not carried forward for detailed analysis in the EA because the Project is anticipated to have negligible socioeconomic impacts. This is due to the small scale of the Project and minimal number of people that would be employed during both construction and operations (EA Chapter 3, Table 3-1).

Additionally, while the draft EA analyzed potential impacts on property values, this analysis was removed from the final EA because the BLM does not have authority over the valuation of private property. Private property values are influenced by many factors, including market conditions and

⁵ United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management. 2013. Best Management Practices for Reducing Visual Impacts of Renewable Energy Facilities on BLM-Administered Lands. First edition. Internet website: https://blmwyomingvisual.anl.gov/docs/BLM_RenewableEnergyVisualBMPs_LowRes.pdf.

buyer preferences. While public concerns about impacts on property values are acknowledged, the issue is outside the jurisdiction of the BLM and the scope of this EA (EA Chapter 3, Table 3-1).

iv. Effects on the quality of life of the American people

In addition to the beneficial impacts on public health and safety because of increased communications coverage for emergency services, the Project considered in the EA would result in expanded wireless service coverage and capacity, including internet, along Highway 62 throughout the Morongo Grade. Increased wireless communications coverage and capacity would benefit not only emergency services, but potentially also area residents.

During the scoping process and Draft EA public comment period, many members of the public expressed valid concerns about potential impacts of the Project. These comments were considered in the EA analysis, responded to in EA Appendix C (Substantive Comments on the Draft LUPA and EA), and considered during development of this FONSI.

After thorough consideration of the Project description contained in EA Chapter 2 (Section 2.5, Alternative D – Reduced View [Site 2]) and Appendix B (Plan of Development), the analysis of impacts of Alternative D contained in EA Chapter 3 (Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences), and the CMAs and BMPs in EA Appendix D (Applicant-Proposed Measures), I have reached the conclusion that all adverse impacts due to the Project (Alternative D) are either avoided or mitigated below the level of significance through the incorporated measures and design features. Therefore, the Project (Alternative D) would not significantly affect the quality of life of the American people, individually or in combination with other actions. Additional environmental analysis under an environmental impact statement is not needed for this action.

Joseph Stout,

Date

California State Director