FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Frontera Generation Limited Partnership
FE Dockets PP-206 and EA-206

On March 3, 1999, Frontera Generation Limited Partnership (FGLP) filed an application with the Office of Fossil Energy (FE) of the Department of Energy (DOE) for a Presidential permit (FE Docket No. PP-206) to construct, connect, operate, and maintain a double-circuit 230,000-volt (230-kV) electric transmission line across the U.S.-Mexican border in Hidalgo County, Texas. On May 10, 1999, FGLP submitted a companion application (FE Docket EA-206) to FE for authorization to export electric energy to Mexico using this same international transmission line. The proposed transmission line would be connected to the Rio Bravo electrical substation constructed adjacent to the existing FGLP powerplant located west of the town of Mission, Texas, and extend approximately two miles to the U.S.-Mexican border. At the border, these transmission facilities would interconnect with similar facilities to be owned and operated by the Comision Federal de Electricidad (CFE), the national electric utility of Mexico.

Prior to issuing a Presidential permit or electricity export authorization, DOE must evaluate the environmental impacts of the proposed projects and reasonable alternatives pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) (42 U.S.C. 4321, et. seq.). In compliance with NEPA, DOE has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA; DOE/EA-1297) entitled Rio Bravo Electrical Interconnection Project for the combined Federal actions of authorizing construction of the proposed cross-border transmission line and the export of electric energy to Mexico over that line.

FGLP has constructed a 500-megawatt (MW), combined-cycle, electric powerplant consisting of two gas-fired combustion turbine generators and one steam turbine generator. The powerplant is located west of Mission, Texas, in Hidalgo County and will operate as a merchant plant. FGLP original intention in constructing the powerplant was to market the electrical output solely to U.S. entities. However, in response to a solicitation by CFE for the purchase of emergency electric power in CFE's Northeast control area, FGLP now intends to market a portion of the powerplant's electrical output to CFE. The proposed cross-border electric transmission line would be used to deliver some or all of the electrical output of the FGLP powerplant to CFE. The proposed international transmission facilities would extend approximately 2.0 miles from the Rio Bravo Substation to the U.S.-Mexican border. From the border, an additional 5.6 miles of transmission would be built by CFE in order to extend the transmission line to CFE's Cumbres Substation, located near Reynosa in the Mexican State of Tamaulipas.

FGLP has proposed a 3-phase approach for developing this U.S.-Mexican interconnection. CFE has indicated an immediate need to purchase power to supply its expected electrical demand during the summer of 1999. To meet CFE's near-term power need, the first phase of FGLP's proposal would be construction of a single, temporary, 138,000-volt (138-kV) transmission line on wooden poles. This type of construction could be completed quickly and provide an electrical interconnection with the capability of transferring 170 MW between the

FGLP powerplant and the CFE system in time for CFE to purchase power to meet the summer demand.

During phase two, FGLP would construct a permanent, double-circuit 230-kV transmission line on tubular steel poles within the same right-of-way as the phase one facilities. These permanent facilities would have the capability of transferring the full capacity of the FGLP powerplant (500-MW) to the CFE system. Phase three would be removal of the temporary 138-kV facilities erected during phase one.

During preparation of the EA, DOE consulted with the Texas State Single Point of Contact. These consultations resulted in comments from the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission. These agencies identified minor shortfalls in some areas of the draft EA. These comments were incorporated into the text of the final document.

In addition to the proposed action, FGLP considered several alternatives, including no action, and three routing alternatives. The DOE has addressed the impacts of these alternatives in the EA. This EA is available on request.

Conclusion

Based on the information contained in the environmental assessment, DOE has determined that issuance of a Presidential permit and an electricity export authorization to FGLP, for the proposed actions, would not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment and, therefore, does not require preparation of an environmental impact statement.

Environmental Consequences of the Proposed Action

The study area is located in the Gulf Coastal Plain area of South Texas. This area is characterized as nearly level to gently sloping, with drainage toward the Rio Grande and the Gulf of Mexico, and is composed of clay, silt, sand, gravel and caliche. The approximately 9,350 ft (1.8 miles) of transmission lines will parallel an existing road for .6 miles after exiting the Rio Bravo Substation, then parallel property lines to the Rio Grande River.

Air Quality Impacts

- There are no air quality impacts because no powerplants are involved. None of the facilities will involve any pollution emissions.

- Impacts due to each of the three phases of construction will be minor, short in duration and local in nature (road dust, exhaust emissions from construction equipment and other vehicles).

Cultural Resources Impacts

- No Indian reservations or other lands owned by Native American groups are located in Hidalgo County, Texas.

- There will be minimal impacts, if any, on cultural sites. There are no cultural resources that have been recorded within 1,000 feet of the proposed centerline of the preferred alternative or any alternative routes.

- Construction workers will be instructed about cultural sites. If historical properties are encountered, design considerations, landscaping, or relocation activities will be employed.

Land Resource Impacts

- The preferred alternative will require the construction of 10 transmission structures spaced at 750 ft intervals.

- The preferred alternative crosses primarily agricultural land. Construction activities during each of the three phases of the FGLP project could impact agricultural production, depending on the timing of activities. However, due to the relatively small area affected, and the short duration of construction activities, agricultural impacts are expected to be small.

- The Putz Airfield is along the proposed alternative. Putz Airfield is used for small planes used in the agricultural industry. At the airfield, the transmission line will be constructed underground for approximately 1800 feet. The underground portion of the transmission line and the tubular steel transmission cable risers will be installed as the permanent 230-kV facilities.

- The preferred alternative does not cross any recreational areas. No existing residential, commercial or industrial buildings are within 200 feet of the preferred alternative.

Water Resource Impacts

- No streams will be crossed. Surface water within the study area is expected to be unchanged as a result of the proposed transmission line. Storm runoff, flow duration, low flow, and water quality characteristics should not experience any major alterations.

- The 400 foot segment of the Rio Grande River crossed by the transmission line is not a part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System nor has it been cited in the Nationwide Rivers Inventory. However, the Rio Grande River was recently designated

an "American Heritage River" under a non-regulated Federal program to support local restoration and environmental programs.

Ecological Impacts

- No Federally designated "critical habitat" occur within the study area.
- Five structures will be located in the 100-year floodplain. The structures will be raised on concrete piers to keep the structures above the 100-year flood level.

Secondary Environmental Concerns

- Bird strikes could be expected at the river crossing span. The use of anti-collision markers at the Rio Grande River will minimize strikes.
- The transmission line will not result in significant electric or magnetic fields or ion generation. Potential effects can be reduced or eliminated by appropriate mitigation.
- With regard to environmental justice, no impacts would occur due to the construction of the proposed transmission line along the proposed alternative.

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