

Attachment 7.3.2
GridAmerica – Environmental Assessment Details

Impacts during site development

Impacts during site development will be limited because GridAmerica is proposing to use existing and newly-cleared ROW for staging and, equipment parking, and will also use existing access routes. Temporary impacts during site development will be minor and may include noise associated with construction (see Section 7.3.ix), wildlife avoidance (due to noise and construction activity disturbance, see Section 7.3.v), restriction of access under the transmission line and around the structures (see Section 7.3.vi), and visual impacts (see Section 7.3.x). Wetlands impacts and soil erosion will be minimized to the greatest extent practicable by delineating and avoiding wetlands in the field prior to construction, and by utilizing standard erosion control practices that will be detailed in the project Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP) (see Section 7.3.iv). Air emissions, including dust, will be minor (see Section 7.3.iii). Construction may be restricted during specific seasons or timeframes in environmentally sensitive areas in accordance with federal and state regulations.

Permitting for the proposed Project will include an extensive state and federal environmental review, during which GridAmerica will specify potential impacts anticipated during site development, and commit to specific measures for avoidance, minimization, or mitigation. Prior to permitting, resource surveys will occur within the ROW, which will not have significant impacts on environmental resources. As a requirement of necessary environmental permits, the NERL project will be required to demonstrate no undue adverse impact.

Transportation infrastructure

The proposed Project will be collocated within or adjacent to an existing, permitted 345 kV electric transmission line for its entire length, and existing access roads will be utilized for construction and maintenance. Therefore, impacts to transportation infrastructure are anticipated to be negligible.

GridAmerica will work with the New York State Department of Transportation (“**NYSDOT**”), the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (“**MassDOT**”), and municipalities to develop traffic control plans and construction access plans where required. Permits will be required for aerial crossings and for construction at state-maintained roadways, including but not limited to: NY State Route 22 near Stephentown; MA Route 43 near Hancock; U.S. Highway 7 near Lanesborough; MA Route 8 near Berkshire; and MA Route 9 near Dalton. Because existing access routes will be utilized, no new state highway access permits or temporary driveways are anticipated to be necessary but a determination of need will be reviewed with each state DOT for work in or proximate to state highways. GridAmerica will adhere to all load limitations on roadways. Drivers on local roadways may experience temporary traffic delays or detours during construction.

Air quality impacts

The NERL project will deliver a new supply of reliable renewable energy into the New England power grid. Minimal emissions during the operational phase will be limited to vehicular exhaust and dust during infrequent maintenance activities such as inspections and vegetation management. The proposed Project is being developed by GridAmerica in response to the *RFP for Long Term Contracts for Clean Energy Projects issued March 31, 2017*. A key purpose of the RFP is to help the Commonwealth of Massachusetts meet its GWSA goals. The Project operations will therefore improve air quality within the region by reducing the amount of greenhouse gases otherwise produced to satisfy the energy demands of the Commonwealth.

Air quality impacts associated with the construction of the transmission line are expected to be minimal, and limited to fugitive dust, vehicular exhaust, and use of temporary portable concrete batch plants during the construction period. These emissions will be temporary in nature, and impacts will be minimal because of the rural nature of the NERL project area and temporary timeframe associated with

construction. A fugitive dust control plan will be developed if treatment is required with chemical or dust control agents for safety or visibility purposes. Temporary concrete batch plants will be properly permitted as specified by state or local regulations.

Access to water resources/water quality impacts

No water resources will be required for construction and operation of the proposed project, unless water trucks are required for dust mitigation. If required, water will be sourced from municipal supplies following existing water withdrawal standards.

Significant impacts to water quality and water resources are not anticipated. In general, any construction project has the potential to impact surface and groundwater resources by contamination from spills or leaks, changes in infiltration rates in areas of disturbance, and damage to wells and piping systems in construction areas. GridAmerica will complete a SWPPP intended to prevent pollution of surface and groundwater through implementation of best management practices (“**BMPs**”), with particular emphasis/safeguards at or proximate to water supply sources. These BMPs are designed to prevent and manage releases of hazardous materials and soil erosion. Hazardous materials will be primarily limited to fuels and small amounts of lubricants in construction and maintenance vehicles. Impervious surfaces will not be significantly increased and will be limited to the very minimal footprint of transmission poles. GridAmerica will work with states and municipalities to locate and avoid wells located within the expanded ROW to the extent practicable.

A preliminary assessment of potential impacts to wetlands, vernal pools, and streams is provided below.

Wetlands – A review of publicly available National Wetlands Inventory (“**NWI**”) data identified a total of 32 wetlands crossed by the proposed transmission line including eight in New York and 24 in Massachusetts. The NYSDEC identifies one of these as a NYSDDEC-regulated wetland in the town of Stephentown, New York. Of the NWI mapped wetlands, most will be spanned with site-specific engineering considerations and to the greatest extent possible structures will be located outside of wetlands. Additional wetland field delineations will be conducted in the area planned for clearing to verify wetland resources within the ROW to avoid impact.

Construction activities will be designed to avoid impacting wetlands wherever possible. The overhead configuration for the NERL project will be more protective of wetlands as transmission line structures and staging areas required for conductor pulling activities during construction can generally be located outside of wetland areas. If construction access roads cannot avoid wetland areas, wetland matting will be required to minimize temporary impacts from construction vehicles. The existing access roads will allow for significant reductions in potential wetland alteration and impacts. The conversion of forested wetland habitat to a scrub-shrub or emergent wetland would constitute a permanent wetland impact that may require additional mitigation measures.

Streams and Water Crossings - A total of 12 streams mapped in the National Hydrography Dataset (NHD) are crossed by the proposed transmission line including 5 in New York and 7 in Massachusetts. The majority of these stream crossings are also associated with remotely mapped wetlands. Additional jurisdiction streams may be identified during the environmental survey process.

The transmission line will be designed to span streams and waterbodies wherever possible. As with wetlands, an overhead configuration for the NERL project will generally be more protective of streams as transmission line structures could be located to provide a vegetative buffer along stream banks.

Preliminary consultation with state agencies has identified BMPs that will be implemented to the extent

practicable to minimize impacts to waterbodies.

Vernal Pools - A vernal pool is a natural, temporary to semi-permanent body of water occurring in a shallow depression that typically fills during the spring or fall and may dry completely during the summer. Vernal pools provide valuable habitat for plants and wildlife, including several rare, threatened, and endangered species and are regulated by state and federal agencies (USACE with consultation from the USFWS, NYNHP, and MA NHESP). New York does not maintain a vernal pool database, but a review of available data in Massachusetts reveals four vernal pools that are located within 150 feet of the proposed center line.

Field surveys to verify the presence or absence of vernal pools will be conducted in spring of 2018 in accordance with agency-approved protocols. The presence of vernal pools within or near the proposed ROW could result in seasonal restrictions for construction to minimize or avoid potential impacts. Impacts to these resources could also potentially trigger additional mitigation requirements. There are a number of standard BMPs that can be employed to avoid adverse impact to these pools, which can include spanning over the resource, leaving shrub cover, and avoiding removal of more than 75 percent of the surrounding habitat.

Ecological and natural resources impacts

Construction and operation of the proposed Project, particularly the limited clearing of forested areas to expand the existing ROW, have the potential to impact wildlife resources and natural communities. In general, impacts to wildlife species will include temporary displacement due to construction activities and permanent alteration of habitat where forest clearing is required. The Project will comply with all federal, state, and local requirements for natural resource protection and survey. Additionally, collocation within and adjacent to an existing ROW will minimize potential natural resource impacts. This method for collocation follows along an agency-expressed preference and is an accepted practice for avoiding impacts.

Field surveys will be conducted to support assessment of potential impacts to ecological and natural resources in summer/fall 2017 and spring 2018.

The following provides a preliminary assessment of potential impacts based on desktop information.

Rare, Threatened and Endangered Species – Online databases from the USFWS, NYSDEC, and the MA DFW were reviewed to identify state and federally listed species that may occur in the counties crossed by the proposed Project. Federally-listed species known to occur in Rensselaer County New York and Berkshire County, Massachusetts include the bog turtle (federally threatened, state endangered in both states), and the northern long-eared bat (threatened federally and in NY, endangered in MA). Consultation with the USFWS, NYSDEC, and the Massachusetts NHESP has begun and will continue to identify any specific species concerns in the NERL project area.

Significant impacts to the bog turtle (*Glyptemys muhlenbergii*) are not anticipated because significant impacts to its habitat (wetlands) are not expected. GridAmerica will comply with the 4(d) rule under the federal Endangered Species Act which became effective February 16, 2016. The 4(d) rule states that “incidental take resulting from tree removal is prohibited if : 1) occurs within 0.25 mile radius of known NLEB hibernacula or 2) cuts or destroys known occupied maternity roost trees, or any other trees within a 150-foot radius from the known maternity tree during the pup season (June 1 through July 31).” As directed by USFWS guidance, GridAmerica will contact state natural resources agencies to obtain additional information on the location of known NLEB hibernacula and maternity roost trees and adhere to any applicable time of year restrictions on activities.

No federally listed plants have been documented in Rensselaer County, New York or Berkshire County, Massachusetts. However, there are many state listed plant species that could potentially be impacted by the NERL project. Aquatic plants are not a significant concern, because impacts to waterbodies are expected to be minimal. Rare plants and natural communities are unlikely to have a significant regulatory impact on the development of the NERL project; however, NYSDEC and NHESP generally encourage applicants to avoid any plant species or natural communities of conservation concern to the maximum extent practicable. Appropriately timed and targeted botanical surveys along with incidental observations during field assessments should garner the necessary information to address regulatory requirements. Upcoming field surveys will help to further address this concern and support presence or presumed absence and any necessary avoidance measures based on species- specific habitat needs.

Given the documented presence of certain threatened and endangered species within the NERL project area, outreach and coordination with USFWS, NYSDEC, and NHESP is already underway to determine the need for field surveys. GridAmerica will identify mitigation measures to limit incidental take during construction. Potential mitigation may require seasonal restrictions of certain activities, such as time of year restrictions for tree clearing to avoid bat roosting during the summer season. Other mitigation measures may include avoidance of individual plants and populations, avoidance of rare communities, and agency consultation of mitigation strategies for long-term vegetation maintenance within the transmission corridor.

Significant Environmental Areas – New York and Massachusetts designate certain areas as significant habitat. There are no such areas within 0.5 mile of the NERL project in New York. Within Berkshire County, Massachusetts the NERL project has a less than 0.5-mile crossing of an area that is designated by NHESP both as Estimated Habitat of Rare Wildlife and Priority Habitat of Rare Species. Construction of the NERL project will result in minimal impacts to this area given that previous disturbance has occurred in this area and that the NERL project will be collocated, impacts are expected to be insignificant. While significant physical habitat impacts are not expected outside of the ROW, construction activity could potentially result in noise, vibration, and soil disturbance in this area. There are also potential similar impacts on another Priority Habitat area, listed by the NHESP as PH1115, which is located within 0.5 mile of the NERL project. GridAmerica will consult with the NHESP to identify potential impacts associated with expansion of the existing ROW in these locations.

Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs) are areas within Massachusetts that receive special recognition because of the quality, uniqueness and significance of their natural and cultural resources. No ACECs will be crossed by the NERL project. However, the Hinsdale Flats Watershed ACEC is within 0.5 mile of the NERL project. The area is home to several state-listed rare plants, the wood turtle (*Glyptemys insculpta*) (Massachusetts Species of Special Concern), and contains fishery habitat. Significant impacts to this area are not expected because it will not be crossed or directly impacted by the NERL project. The Massachusetts DCR, the administrator of the ACEC, will be consulted regarding avoidance of potential impacts.

Certain significant environmental areas are subject to state regulations. The NYNHP and the Massachusetts NHESP will be consulted prior to construction to ensure that impacts to these ecosystems and the species within these ecosystems are minimized. Surveys will be carried out to make sure that the NERL project and associated activities avoid these areas to the extent practicable.

Noxious and Invasive Plants – New York and Massachusetts, as well as some municipalities, will require project-specific reconstruction invasive species surveys that should be utilized to develop an invasive species management plan for the NERL project. Specific mitigation measures could include revegetation

with native plants, monitoring, and treatment of exotics with pesticides as necessary. Additionally, BMPs will include the cleaning of any non-local equipment to prevent the introduction of non-native species to the NERL project area.

Protected Avian Species – Bald eagles have been documented in both Rensselaer and Berkshire counties. Bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) are no longer a federally listed species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but it remains a state-listed endangered species in New York. At the federal level, the BGEPA is the primary law protecting eagles. BGEPA prohibits “take” of eagles without a permit (16 USC § 668-668d), which includes disturbance and destruction of nests. Extensive knowledge of species behavior allows for a clear understanding of avoidance measures, such as marker balls or collocating with existing corridors, to avoid risk of mortality in areas that may see use by this species.

According to USFWS consultation there is the potential for 19 species of migratory birds to be present in the NERL project area. Clearing of vegetation during construction, especially forested habitat, may cause impacts, including positive impacts from habitat conversion, on nesting birds and nesting habitat. Pursuant to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), harassment and harm to migratory birds should be avoided and minimized to the extent practicable. In addition to timing restrictions on clearing, avoidance measures may include reporting and avoidance protocols for finding active nests during construction. Further agency consultation will inform avoidance measures that could be employed on the NERL project.

Land use impacts

The proposed Project will be collocated within and adjacent to an existing, permitted 345 kV electric transmission line for its entire length. Land uses crossed by the proposed Project are largely the same as those crossed by the existing transmission line and associated ROW. The proposed Project will cross business and residential districts for relatively short distances.

Lands along the proposed Project ROW are characterized as partially cleared forest, forested, open land/grassland, and/or agricultural land with pockets of conservation and recreation lands, and residential and other developed land uses. Clearing of limited portions of forested land will be required. The proposed Project will cross lands with conservation easements in New York and Massachusetts held in trust by private and public entities. The proposed Project will also cross recreational resources and lands including the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (AT), Pittsfield State Forest and Cleveland Brook Reservoir Water Supply Lands, and several recreational trails.

Sited properly, transmission lines can be compatible land uses with recreation and conservation lands. Changes to existing land use will be limited because the proposed Project is collocated with an existing transmission line and ROW, and because agricultural and recreation activities that occur within the existing transmission ROW can safely resume under the new transmission line after construction is complete. Trails will be spanned. Construction activities will preclude recreational and agricultural use within the ROW temporarily, and GridAmerica will coordinate with landowners and recreation managers to minimize disruption of such activities through the potential use of time of year restrictions, safety fencing or other feasible construction methods.

Cultural resources

Cultural resources include archaeological sites, historic standing structures, objects, districts, and traditional cultural properties that illustrate or represent important aspects of prehistory or history, or that have important and long-standing cultural associations with established communities or social groups. GridAmerica intends to complete necessary cultural resource surveys in 2017 and 2018.

Significant archaeological and architectural properties are generally defined by the eligibility criteria for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) is triggered for the NERL project due to the USACE permit and will require consultation with the State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPOs) and, potentially, Native American tribes. Evaluation of potential impacts to cultural resources will be completed as part of the Article VII application. For Massachusetts, evaluation of potential impacts to cultural resources will be conducted as part of the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) review.

Archaeological and Historic Resources – A review of available online and GIS databases indicated that no previously documented cultural resources have been mapped within the direct footprint of the NERL project. No NRHP-listed resources are located within the NERL project ROW, or within the general vicinity of the NERL project area.

A review of New York SHPO's online database, the Cultural Resources Information System (CRIS), identified two archaeologically sensitive areas, one intersected by the alignment and one within a quarter mile of the alignment. Additionally the NERL project is within the vicinity of one historic bridge constructed in 1939, determined not eligible for the NRHP due to loss of integrity.

A review of the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC)'s online database, the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System (MACRIS), determined numerous historic structures are located within 1,000 feet of the NERL project. The majority of these structures represent single dwellings potentially significant for their architectural styles, and one state-listed historic district, Lanesborough Center, which is located within 150 feet of the NERL project. Lastly, one cemetery, the Southworth Cemetery dating from 1791, is within 450 feet of the NERL project on Main Road in the Town of Hancock.

As the NERL project moves forward, cultural resources assessment will be performed that includes a comprehensive desktop review, site reconnaissance survey, architectural survey, and a Phase I archaeological survey within archaeologically sensitive portions the project area as determined by the USACE. Throughout this process, USACE will consult with the SHPOs and any Native American tribes participating in Section 106 consultation.

Potential Native American Interests – There are eight federally recognized Tribes resident in New York; the Cayuga Nation, the Oneida Nation of New York, the Onondaga Nation, the Saint Regis Mohawk Tribe (formerly the St. Regis Band of Mohawk Indians of New York), the Seneca Nation of Indians, the Shinnecock Indian Nation, the Tonawanda Band of Seneca, and the Tuscarora Nation of New York. Federally recognized Tribes resident in Massachusetts include the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, the Narragansett Indian Tribe, the Stockbridge-Munsee Community and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah) of Massachusetts. Additionally, both New York and Massachusetts, through legislative acts, have formally recognized Native American Tribes at the state level. State recognized Tribes resident in New York include Unkechaug Nation, and in Massachusetts Nipmuc Nation. The USACE will be responsible for initiating and conducting Section 106 consultation with Native American tribes.

Previous site use (e.g., greenfield, brownfield, industrial, etc.)

The proposed Project will be collocated within and adjacent to an existing, permitted 345 kV electric transmission line for its entire length. Lands within the area proposed for the expanded ROW are primarily undeveloped, open, or agricultural with pockets of residential and recreational land uses. Agricultural activities and recreational activities will be able to resume under the proposed transmission line after construction.

There are no known liabilities or environmental conditions in the proposed Project ROW that will cause environmental impacts due to construction of the proposed Project.

Noise level impacts

Temporary impacts due to construction noise can be expected. Construction is typically completed in several phases, but various construction activities may overlap, with multiple construction crews working simultaneously. Sound levels resulting from construction activities will vary significantly depending on several factors such as the length of time the equipment is in use, the distance between the equipment and noise-sensitive receptors (NSRs), the type and age of equipment, the specific equipment manufacturer and model, the operations being performed and the number of operations being performed at any given time, and the overall condition of the equipment.

During operation, transmission lines may generate noise (corona noise), which is caused by the partial electrical breakdown of the insulating properties of air around the electrical conductors and overhead power lines. Substation operations will also generate some noise. Noise from electrical equipment is not anticipated to be significant because of the rural nature of the proposed ROW, and distance from homes and businesses. Such noise may not be audible over typical noises heard in this environment such as wind, rustling leaves, and traffic or household appliances in more developed areas.

Given the existing transmission line and substations to be utilized for the benefits of collocation, noise is not expected to become a significant concern for the NERL project although review of noise will be a component of New York's Article VII and Massachusetts' MEPA and Energy Facilities Siting Board application and review process.

Aesthetic/visual impacts

Visual sensitivity is important when assessing the potential impact of an overhead transmission line and visual impact will be addressed specifically in the New York and Massachusetts regulatory review of the NERL project.

Based on desktop review, potential visually sensitive areas in the vicinity of the NERL project for which a visual impact assessment may be required include Cherry Plain State Park in New York and the following areas in Massachusetts:

- Chalet Wildlife Management Area,
- Pittsfield State Forest,
- Appalachian Trail (closest scenic vista is The Cobbles which is located 2.3 miles north-northeast from the location where the proposed Project crosses the AT),
- Jiminy Peak Ski Area,
- Cheshire Reservoir,
- Taconic Scenic Landscape Unit (Distinctive), and
- Taconic Scenic Landscape Unit (Noteworthy).

Of these resources, the NERL project will pass directly through Pittsfield State Forest, the Chalet Wildlife Management Area and the Appalachian Trail, all of which are used recreationally (hiking, camping, etc.). Impacts to users include temporary disturbance associated with construction activities and limited clearing of trees including restricted trail access. GridAmerica will work with stakeholders to develop vegetation management procedures that will limit permanent disturbance, particularly to users of the Appalachian Trail. An important mitigating feature of the NERL project is its location adjacent to or within existing transmission line ROWs, resulting in incremental rather than new (greenfield) visual impacts.

For these sensitive resource areas and others identified through collaboration with federal, state, and local governments and with stakeholders, studies of the view shed will be performed to understand potential visibility from these locations. If the NERL project would be visible from sensitive locations, additional detailed studies may be necessary to determine the degree of potential visual impact. GridAmerica has minimized potential impact to aesthetics by co-locating the NERL project within and adjacent to an existing utility ROW, and will seek to co-locate structures and conductor heights and spans to further reduce potential for visual impact. The proposed Project eliminates the need for new greenfield routes to be constructed. Overall, it is expected that the NERL project's impact will be incremental with the new transmission line located adjacent to existing transmission lines; however, a visual impact assessment will be completed as a component of New York's Article VII and Massachusetts' MEPA and Energy Facilities Siting Board application and review process.

Transmission infrastructure impacts

See responses to Section 7.3(i) through 7.3(x) above. The proposed Project is a new 23-mile, 345 kV transmission line that will deliver a new supply of reliable renewable energy into the New England power grid. The Project will bolster the existing transmission system by adding a new and renewable source of energy into the grid, and is not expected to be a detriment to existing transmission infrastructure in any way. Temporary outages at transmission facilities may be required when the new transmission line is energized, but impacts to consumers of electricity are not expected.

Fuel supply access, where applicable

Fuel supplies are not expected to be necessary except during construction for equipment and vehicles. Any refueling activities will be conducted in designated locations, and BMPs to prevent or manage spills will be provided in Project-specific management plans.