

Revised Decision Notice
& Finding of No Significant Impact
Natural Gas Pipeline SR179
(Village of Oak Creek to Sedona)

USDA Forest Service
Red Rock Ranger District, Coconino National Forest
Coconino and Yavapai Counties, State of Arizona

Decision and Reasons for the Decision

Revised Decision Notice Information

This Decision Notice withdraws my decision dated October 16, 2004. It is replaced by this Revised Decision Notice and is the result of UniSource Energy Service (UES) submitting a request for Emergency Situation Determination to allow immediate implementation of the gas line decision.

After a review of the situation and information supplied by UES, I recommended and Regional Forester, Harv Forsgren, approved the Emergency Situation Determination under 36 CFR 215.10 (b). The information submitted by UES documented and supported that without the ability to begin construction of this project immediately there is a risk to human health and safety.

The Environmental Assessment was completed which involved extensive public involvement, and I signed the Decision Notice (DN) on October 13, 2004. From the time I signed the DN to October 20, 2004, when I received the request for an Emergency Situation Determination; UES executives have been conferring on ways to provide customers with natural gas, in lieu of being able to construct the pipeline prior to the winter months setting in. However, none of the alternatives are without risk.

With our 45-day appeal period (plus 5 days), construction could not begin (if there are no appeals) until December 6, 2004. This is well into the season when inclement weather could prevent construction; when gas usage is at its peak, and consequently, when there is a high risk for disruption of gas services. If we wait for an actual disruption of service and then request a relief from the “stay” to proceed with this project, it will still require 6-12 weeks to complete the construction. While a disruption of gas service could still occur during the construction period if there are abnormally low temperatures, by taking action now, we will try to avoid or reduce the number of days the community is at risk.

The Decision Notice is revised by the above paragraphs and the Implementation Section. All other portions of the Decision remain as was originally issued.

Background

The Coconino National Forest has been considering a proposal by UniSource Energy Services (UES), (formerly Citizens Utilities) to construct the last portion of a loop 6-inch diameter natural gas line from the Village of Oak Creek to Sedona near Sedona, Arizona and along State Route 179. This project is proposed to include construction of approximately 5.3 miles of natural gas line construction by trenching and driving over an approximately 40 foot wide area along the

proposed bifurcated State Route (SR) 179 highway section through the Coconino National Forest from Back O Beyond area to the Village of Oak Creek.

Current Verde Valley gas pipelines begin at the supply source in Clarkdale, with a leg going to Sedona and another to Camp Verde and then on to the Village of Oak Creek south of Sedona. Natural gas is delivered in a high pressure system. Supply line pressures to the UES Sedona area system have been reduced over the last several years due to regional and local factors. The development of gas powered electric generation plants in the southwestern U.S. has reduced the gas pressure arriving in from the supplier in Clarkdale at the beginning of the UES loop. The local population growth has also reduced the pressure because the existing 4-inch gas pipeline into Sedona from Cottonwood was built in the 1950's to accommodate only a population of 1000 customers but is now serving over 5700 customers. Therefore, UES gas service increased demand and reduced pressure has resulted in the potential for customer outages in Sedona during peak use times and the system does not currently have a loop to provide services if there is ever a break in the supply lines. Construction of the proposed segment of natural gas line will create a loop system in case of line breaks as well as provide for increased pressure in the Sedona area where service outages could occur. The environmental assessment (EA) documents the analysis of six (6) alternatives to meet this need.

Decision

Based upon my review of all alternatives, I have decided to implement the Purple Alternative which would approve issuance of a permit/easement to UES to construct, operate and maintain a 6-inch natural gas line along the bifurcated southbound alignment of the proposed SR 179 highway project. The southern end of the gas line project (south of Village of Oak Creek) will be constructed on private property near Arabian Way and Rojo Drive to SR179. No National Forest is needed for this segment as was initially disclosed in the EA. The Purple alternative between the Village of Oak Creek and Sedona would be coordinated with the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) to align the gas line as close to and within the area expected to be disturbed for future highway construction. This alternative does not include a trail within the gas line area in accordance with the ADOT's publicly developed Needs Based Implementation Plan and Corridor Wide Framework selected alternative for SR 179 improvements. The selected alternative includes a slight shift in gas line alignment from what was originally shown in the Executive Summary of Draft Environmental Assessment. This shift is being made to facilitate the intent of the Purple alternative which was to place the gas line within the proposed highway corridor. ADOT has made a shift in the north end of Segment 2 of the highway project and the Purple alternative selection places the gas line within the same realigned highway corridor to combine the construction impacts of both projects as much as possible. The effects disclosed in the EA are not substantially changed by this alignment shift.

When compared to the other alternatives this alternative will meet the purpose and need by connecting the existing pipelines together to form a more reliable natural gas service loop and increase gas pressures at the end of the existing Sedona leg (Uptown areas) to ensure adequate supplies to existing customers without interruption. In addition, this alternative best minimizes the construction impacts and vegetation removal associated with this project for the longer term by combining the gas line corridor with the proposed SR179 highway corridor improvements. This alternative also reduces the construction impacts to the traveling public along the existing SR 179 corridor. While there could still be areas along the proposed gas line route that may be impacted by gas line construction that will not be impacted during highway construction, UES

has committed to minimizing their construction area and staging areas and to a phased restoration plan that would include seeding all disturbed areas upon completion of construction and then replanting with appropriate sized vegetation in areas that will not be cleared for highway construction after highway clearing limits have been determined. While there will be areas along the Purple Alternative that will be impacted from a scenic quality standpoint, all alternatives had effects from various viewpoints (see EA section III, E). The Purple Alternative is one of two alternatives that are least visible from six viewpoints overall, but slightly more visible in the middleground from Sky Mountain subdivision. Highway construction along this same corridor will also be visible from these areas. This alternative meets requirements under the National Energy Policy to facilitate the supply of reliable energy services to the public, the Coconino National Forest Land and Resource Plan which supports construction of utilities in combined corridors while protecting other resources and protects the recreation experience along the existing trail system in this area. It is also consistent with the National Historic Preservation Act by not impacting cultural resources and the Endangered Species Act by not impacting threatened and endangered species.

Other Alternatives Considered

In addition to the selected alternative, I considered [5] other alternatives, including the No Action Alternative. A comparison of these alternatives can be found in the EA. All alternatives except the No Action included consideration of a small area of National Forest at the south end of the Village of Oak Creek from private property to SR 179. This southern section is no longer required on the National Forest as private easements have been obtained by UES in this area.

No Action Under the No Action alternative, current management plans would continue to guide management of the project area. No pipeline would be constructed on the National Forest and UES would not be able to meet their customer needs.

Blue Alternative: The initial Proposed Action by UES followed the existing SR 179 corridor at the outside edge of the existing 200 foot right of way, separated from the existing roadway pavement.

Red Alternative: Generally followed the Bell Rock Pathway in the northern most section, diverted to go along the existing Qwest overhead phone line and then back to the pathway area around Bell Rock and back to the phone line to and across the access road to the Bell Rock Pathway parking lot and then into SR 179 and private property in the Village of Oak Creek.

Orange Alternative: Again generally follow the Bell Rock Pathway in the northern section and follows the Qwest overhead line as in the Red alternative but would then cross SR 179 near the Yavapai/Coconino County boundary near the access to Bell Rock Wilderness trail and then follow the Purple alternative alignment (ADOT highway alignment) into the Village of Oak Creek.

Yellow Alternative: ...Follows the same alignment as the Purple Alternative, but assumed the highway would not be built in this corridor and a trail would be designated along the pipeline alignment. This alternative was considered when it was unknown whether ADOT would build a bifurcated roadway in this area or not.

Public Involvement

As described in the background, the need for this action arose in July 2002 with a formal proposed action being provided to the public for input. UES (formerly Citizens Utilities) had expressed the need for the loop system several years prior to this proposal and began by constructing other sections of the loop pipeline and serving additional customers in other areas in the Verde Valley. A proposal to construct the Village of Oak Creek to Sedona Natural Gas Line was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions in August 2002 to current. The proposal was provided to the public and other agencies for comment during scoping in July 2002 and again through a 30-day public comment period which began on June 9, 2004. In addition, as part of the public involvement process, the agency and UES met with City of Sedona and ADOT officials and also with the Big Park Regional Coordinating Council and Yavapai County to address concerns. The Forest Service and UES sponsored two public open houses to inform and involve the public, one on March 4, 2004 and one on June 23, 2004 during the 30-day comment period.

Using the comments from the public, other agencies, and Yavapai County and ADOT (see *Issues* section), the interdisciplinary team identified several issues regarding the effects of the proposed action. Main issues of concern included removal of vegetation beyond what ADOT would remove during highway construction, traffic congestion during construction, impacts to the character along the Bell Rock Pathway by removal of vegetation and concern that restoration techniques in visually sensitive areas would not meet Forest Plan objectives. To address these concerns, the Forest Service created the alternatives described above.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After considering the environmental effects described in the EA, I have determined that these actions will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment considering the context and intensity of impacts (40 CFR 1508.27). Thus, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. I base my finding on the following:

1. My finding of no significant environmental effects is not biased by the beneficial effects of the action.
2. There will be no significant effects on public health and safety, because construction of the pipeline away from the existing highway and trail minimizes conflicts and contact between construction activities and users. Also construction of the pipeline addresses concerns of interruptions in gas service to existing customers that could create safety issues during potential failures of the system.
3. There will be no significant effects on unique characteristics of the area, because the gas line corridor will be constructed in a corridor where highway construction will also occur. The existing State-designated scenic highway character will not be impacted by the selection of this alternative, although construction areas may be seen from the highway. There are no historic, cultural, park lands, prime farm lands, wetlands, or wild and scenic rivers that will be affected by the project.
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial because there is no known scientific controversy over the impacts of the

project, even though there will be short-term construction impacts from removal of vegetation as a result of the project, changing views of the natural area along the new highway corridor. Construction of the highway within this corridor and establishment of vegetation in the construction area will soften the impacts of project construction. This project and the highway corridor has had controversy associated with them however, public involvement has resulted in general concurrence with the gas line proposal and highway alignment choices.

5. We have considerable experience with the types of activities to be implemented. The effects analysis shows the effects are not uncertain, and do not involve unique or unknown risk. Utility construction projects have been done in this area and results are known. Some corridors have recovered better than others but construction of these types of projects have similar effects. However scenic sensitivity of this project area has raised more interest than other projects even though effects are not uncertain.
6. The action is not likely to establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects, because this decision completes a loop natural gas system to provide reliable natural gas services to the area. Future gas lines are not foreseen in this area except for possible service distribution to customers.
7. The cumulative impacts are not significant.
8. The action will have no significant adverse effect on districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, because cultural resource surveys and reports were completed for this project area and none were found that would be affected by this project. The action will also not cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources as stated above. Tribal consultation has also occurred on this project through annual consultation letters and no concerns were expressed. Clearance for the project has been granted.
9. The action will not adversely affect any endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species act of 1973, because a Biological Assessment and Evaluation was completed and no endangered or threatened species or their habitat would be affected by this project.
10. The action will not violate Federal, State, and local laws or requirements for the protection of the environment. Applicable laws and regulations were considered in the EA. The action is consistent with the Coconino National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan. Visual impacts will occur as a result of this project but will not lower achieved visual quality objectives but would also not meet the Goals of Retention in this corridor.

Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations

This decision to issue permits/easements to UES for construction, operation and maintenance of the SR 179 Natural Gas Line Village of Oak Creek to Sedona is consistent with the intent of the forest plan's long term goals and objectives. The project was designed in conformance with land and resource management plan standards and incorporates appropriate land and resource management plan guidelines for allowing construction of needed utilities to support needs of

communities, keeping utilities in common corridors with roads and other utility lines, maintaining recreation character and mitigating scenic impacts when possible while serving public needs.

Implementation Date

Emergency Situations

The Regional Forester has determined that an emergency situation exists (36 CFR 215.10), for the entire Natural Gas Line SR 179 (Village of Oak Creek to Sedona) project. Implementation may begin immediately after publication of the legal notice for this project decision in the *Arizona Daily Sun*. Implementation of this entire project has been determined to be an emergency.

Administrative Review or Appeal Opportunities

This decision is subject to administrative review (appeal) pursuant to 36 CFR Part 215. The appeal must be filed (regular mail, fax, email, hand-delivery, or express delivery) with the Appeal Deciding Officer at USDA Forest Service, 333 Broadway Avenue SE, Albuquerque, NM 87102 or fax (505) 842-3173.

The office business hours for those submitting hand-delivered appeals are 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, excluding holidays. Electronic appeals must be submitted in a format such as an email message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc) to: comments-southwestern-regional-office@fs.fed.us. In cases where no identifiable name is attached to an electronic message, a verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature is one way to provide verification. Appeals, including attachments, must be filed within 45 days from the publication date of this notice in the *Arizona Daily Sun*, the newspaper of record. Attachments received after the 45 day appeal period will not be considered. The publication date in the *Arizona Daily Sun* is the exclusive means for calculating the time to file an appeal. Those wishing to appeal this decision should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source.

Individuals or organizations who submitted substantive comments during the comment period specified at 215.6 may appeal this decision. The notice of appeal must meet the appeal content requirements at 36 CFR 215.14.

Contact

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Judy Adams, Lands Staff, Red Rock Ranger District, PO Box 300, Sedona, AZ 86330, telephone: 928-282-4119.

/s/ Carol Boyd for
NORA B. RASURE
Forest Supervisor
Coconino National Forest

10/26/2004
Date