

Merit REACH-3MC Fiber Optic Cable Special Use Permit
Baldwin/White Cloud Ranger District
Lake, Mason, Muskegon, and Newaygo Counties, Michigan

Environmental Consulting & Technology, Inc. (ECT) submitted a special use application on behalf of Merit Network, Inc. (Merit). Merit is a nonprofit organization, owned and governed by the following Michigan Universities: Grand Valley State, Ferris State, Michigan State, Central Michigan, Western Michigan, The University of Michigan, Northern Michigan, Lake Superior State, Michigan Technological, Wayne State, Eastern Michigan, and Oakland. Merit provides high-performance networking and services to the research and education communities in Michigan.

In January 2010, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) awarded a \$33.3 million federal grant through its American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funded Broadband Technology Opportunities Program to Merit. Merit will build the REACH-3MC (Rural, Education, Anchor, Community, and Healthcare – Michigan Middle Mile Collaborative) Project, a 1,015 mile long, 72-strand fiber optic system crossing 33 counties in the Lower Peninsula of Michigan. The **purpose** of the project is to provide affordable, high-speed broadband service to homes, businesses, community anchor institutions, and critical community facilities in unserved and underserved areas in Michigan's Lower Peninsula.

The proposed fiber optic infrastructure project will use existing road and utility rights-of-way for the entire 1,015 miles of the route. The majority of the installation will occur within existing road rights-of-way, involving aerial fiber hung on existing utility poles. No new pole runs are proposed for the project. Some underground installation of fiber optic cable will occur. This project proposes installation of approximately 11.06 miles of 72-strand fiber optic cable across National Forest System lands in four counties; Lake, Mason, Muskegon, and Oceana. Of the 11.06 miles crossing federal lands, approximately 5.81 miles (52.5%) would be hung aerially on existing utility poles in existing road rights-of-way, 4.25 miles (38.5%) would be hung aerially on existing utility poles in existing utility rights-of-way, and 1.0 miles (9.0%) would be installed underground by one of the following methods: bore and jack; horizontal directional drilling; plowing; or in existing conduits. Just over 1% of the entire project would cross National Forest System lands. See Table 1 – Merit REACH-3MC, Proposed Federal Land Crossings.

The Forest Service proposes to issue a 10-year (maximum permit term) special use permit to Merit for the construction, operation, and maintenance of a 72-strand fiber optic cable. The permit would allow the placement and operation of ~11.06 miles of fiber optic cable on National Forest System lands in parts of 5 Townships in 4 counties. Approximately 1 mile would be placed underground with the remainder being installed on existing poles. No new roads are needed and no trees would be cut for the project. Total National Forest System land involved is 13.4 acres (58,397' long x 10' wide/43,560 square feet per acre).

This decision would be implemented through issuance of a special use authorization that meets the requirements of the decision and Forest Service regulations. Forest Service regulations require the applicant to: pay any necessary fees, post any necessary bonds, and secure any state or federal permits or authorizations required by law.

Please provide any comments you might have on the proposed issuance of a special use permit to Merit, Inc. to Diane Walker at: 231-745-4631 ext. 3109, or [dtwalker at fs.fed.us](mailto:dtwalker@fs.fed.us), or P.O. Box Drawer D, Baldwin, MI 49304 by November 30, 2010.