

# MOUNTAIN STATES TRANSMISSION INTERTIE Environmental Impact Statement Newsletter

**MSTI**

Montana Department of Environmental Quality

Bureau of Land Management



The purpose of this newsletter is to update you on where we are in the process of evaluating NorthWestern Energy's proposal to build a 500-kilovolt transmission line from near Townsend, Montana to near Jerome, Idaho. Detailed contact information and websites, if you are interested, are provided at the end of this newsletter.

## Where are we in the process?

The proposal to build the Mountain States Transmission Intertie, or MSTI, is being evaluated by a set of agencies in Idaho and Montana. These agencies include federal (Bureau of Land Management (BLM), U.S. Forest Service, Department of Energy, Agricultural Research Service, and Bureau of Reclamation), and state agencies (e.g. Montana Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) and Idaho Office of Energy Resources) as well as several towns and counties as cooperating agencies. The BLM and the MDEQ are the Lead Agencies conducting the EIS process.

Lead Agencies have gone through a multi-year, multi-disciplinary screening process based on discussions with other federal and state agencies, local governments, local landowners and members of the public to arrive at a suite of viable routing alternatives that have been analyzed in detail (see map). In an effort to ensure that the best routes are being considered, the Lead Agencies are continuing to consult with landowners, interest groups, researchers and other agencies, and have made adjustments to the alternative routes based on these discussions.

In late 2010, a District Court in Jefferson County, Montana ruled that the MDEQ had not adequately consulted with Jefferson County. The MDEQ appealed this decision. Due to the uncertainties surrounding this court case, it is not possible to provide a firm schedule for release of the Draft EIS.

When the Draft EIS is released, federal, state, and local government entities, and the public will have the opportunity to review the analysis and provide comments. Prior to release of the Draft EIS, Lead Agencies will send and publish meeting notices providing the dates, times, and location of public meetings. A minimum of six meetings will be held to take comments, although additional meetings may be scheduled.

Following the comment period (anticipated to be 120 days in duration), the Draft EIS may be revised to address substantive comments and a Final EIS will be published. A decision will subsequently be made by those agencies having jurisdiction.

## What have we been working on?

Over the last few months, the EIS team has focused its efforts on the following four technical areas.

1. **Local Route Modifications:** In response to requests from certain affected landowners and land management agencies, the Lead Agencies are closely evaluating four realignments of MSTI route alternatives. These four areas are:
  - Near Market Lake Wildlife Management Area in Idaho
  - Rochester Gulch north and west of Twin Bridges, Montana
  - Northwest of Silver Star, Montana
  - Northeast of Dell, Montana
2. **Wildlife Mitigation:** Comments from stakeholder groups and wildlife management agencies have directed intensive effort into the analysis and approach to mitigation for wildlife impacts, especially potential impacts to sage grouse that may result from MSTI. Sage grouse were recently placed on

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a list of species that are candidates for Endangered Species Act Protection. In addition to working closely with State and Federal management agencies, the MSTI team has also engaged researchers and non-governmental organizations in an effort to formulate a broad-based, credible plan for monitoring and mitigating for wildlife impacts. The final approach is not yet finalized but will be included in the Draft EIS.

- Visual Resources Plan Amendments:** In certain locations, some of the MSTI alternatives are not consistent with Resource Management Plans (RMPs) of the BLM. If an alternative is selected that has one or more inconsistent segments, the affected RMP must be formally amended. Each potential RMP amendment must be analyzed in the EIS. The BLM has been working diligently at the local, the state, and the Washington Office levels to ensure that a credible and rational approach to these plan amendments is incorporated into the MSTI EIS. This effort has resulted in the completion of additional visual resource analysis and simulations over the last few months.
- Cultural Resources:** The analysis of potential impacts that MSTI may have on cultural resources has been an intensive effort. Many landowners and agencies have expressed concern over impacts to cultural resources. These concerns have resulted in a major rework of the cultural resources section of the EIS. This rework involves new maps, new analysis of impacts to the visual integrity of sensitive cultural sites, and a more thorough and concise presentation of results. All of these efforts are ongoing.

## Key issues identified during scoping and analyzed in the EIS

The MSTI EIS will present the results of a detailed analysis of a comprehensive list of resources that may be impacted by the implementation of this project. There are several resources that have been identified by private citizens, stakeholder groups, local governments, and agency staff as being of particular concern. These include:

- Human Health & Safety (including electric and magnetic fields)
- Visual Resources
- Recreation & Land Use (special management areas, quality and enjoyment of land)
- Socioeconomics (property value impacts, impacts to ratepayers, revenue to counties, tourism)
- Wildlife and Fish habitat
- Cultural Resources
- Weed propagation
- Use of public lands

## Where you can get more information

Maps and information about the proposed MSTI project can be found on the BLM or DEQ websites at:

**BLM:** [http://www.blm.gov/mt/st/en/prog/lands\\_realty/projects.htm](http://www.blm.gov/mt/st/en/prog/lands_realty/projects.htm)      **DEQ:** <http://deq.mt.gov/MFS/MSTI/MSTIindex.asp>

NorthWestern Energy also has a website for the project at [www.msti500kv.com](http://www.msti500kv.com)

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*Thank you for your continued interest in the MSTI EIS process!*

