

Chapter 1 Introduction

The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) has prepared this Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) to provide the public, responsible agencies, and trustee agencies with information about the potential environmental effects of construction and operation of the Estrella Substation and Paso Robles Area Reinforcement Project (Proposed Project) proposed by Pacific Gas & Electric Company (PG&E) and Horizon West Transmission (HWT) (formerly known as NextEra Energy Transmission West, LLC) (collectively referred to as the “Applicants”). The Proposed Project and its location are described in depth in Chapter 2. Alternatives to the Proposed Project are described in Chapter 3. This document was prepared pursuant to the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) of 1970 (as amended) and the CEQA Guidelines (14 California Code of Regulations [CCR] 15000 et seq.).

1.1 Overview of CEQA Requirements

Per CEQA Guidelines section 15022, CEQA’s basic purposes are to:

1. Inform governmental decision-makers and the public about the potential, significant environmental effects of proposed activities.
2. Identify the ways that environmental damage can be avoided or significantly reduced.
3. Prevent significant, avoidable damage to the environment by requiring changes in projects through the use of alternatives or mitigation measures when the government agency finds the changes to be feasible.
4. Disclose to the public the reasons why a governmental agency approved the project in the manner the agency chose if significant environmental effects are involved.

With certain strictly limited exceptions, CEQA requires all state and local government agencies to consider the environmental consequences of projects over which they have discretionary authority before approving or carrying out those projects. CEQA establishes both procedural and substantive requirements that agencies must satisfy to meet CEQA’s objectives. For example, the agency with principal responsibility for approving or carrying out a project (the lead agency) must first assess whether a proposed project could result in significant environmental impacts. If there is substantial evidence that the project could result in significant environmental impacts, CEQA requires that the agency prepare an Environmental Impact Report (EIR), analyzing both the proposed project and a reasonable range of potentially feasible alternatives.

As described in the CEQA Guidelines (CCR Section 15121[a]), an EIR is an informational document that assesses potential environmental effects of a proposed project, and identifies mitigation measures and alternatives to the project that could reduce or avoid potentially significant environmental impacts. Other key CEQA requirements include developing a plan for

implementing and monitoring the success of the identified mitigation measures and carrying out specific public notice and distribution steps to facilitate public involvement in the environmental review process. As an informational document used in the planning and decision-making process, an EIR's purpose is not to recommend either approval or denial of a project.

1.1.1 Intent and Scope of this Document

Although the Proposed Project would be carried out by the Applicants, CPUC has approval authority over the Proposed Project and is the CEQA Lead Agency. In describing and evaluating the various activities comprising the Proposed Project in this DEIR, CPUC is proposing to approve a discretionary project subject to CEQA (CEQA Guidelines Section 15378). CPUC will use the analyses presented in this DEIR, the public response to it, and the whole of the administrative record to evaluate the Proposed Project's environmental impacts and to further modify, approve, or deny approval of the Proposed Project.

1.2 CEQA Process

1.2.1 Notice of Preparation

A notice of preparation (NOP) for the Proposed Project was prepared pursuant to the State CEQA Guidelines (Section 15082) and circulated to the Office of Planning and Research's State CEQA Clearinghouse on July 30, 2018. Subsequently, a revised NOP was circulated on August 1, 2018; the revised NOP corrected a map depicting potential project alternatives, which had inadvertently omitted several possible alternatives in the original NOP. The scoping period continued for 30 days and concluded on August 31, 2018, although several comment letters were accepted beyond this date.

The NOP presented general background information on the Proposed Project, the scoping process, the environmental issues to be addressed in the EIR, and the anticipated uses of the EIR. The NOP was posted online, and more than 200 hard copies of the NOP were distributed by mail to a broad range of stakeholders including state, federal, and local regulatory agencies and jurisdictions, non-profit organizations, and property owners in the vicinity of the Proposed Project. In addition, on August 2 and 5, 2018, an announcement of the release of the NOP, including the dates, times, and locations of scoping meetings, was published in the local newspaper.

1.2.2 Scoping Meeting

To provide the public, as well as responsible and trustee agencies, an opportunity to ask questions and submit comments on the scope of the EIR, a public scoping meeting was held during the scoping period. The meeting was held on Tuesday, August 7, 2018, from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. at the Winifred Pifer Elementary School located at 1350 Creston Road in Paso Robles. The meeting format consisted of a presentation by CPUC and consultant staff followed by opportunities for attendees to ask questions and submit comments. Written comment cards were provided to all meeting attendees, as well as information on how to access project documents and participate in the public review process going forward. A tablet showing an interactive map of the Proposed Project and potential alternatives also was available for viewing during the scoping meeting. A total of 50 individuals signed in to the meeting.

1.2.3 Comments Received During the Scoping Period

During the scoping period, CPUC received approximately 43 comment letters, 37 of which were from members of the general public. Letters were received from five public agencies, as follows:

- City of El Paso de Robles
- County of San Luis Obispo
- California Department of Conservation
- California Native American Heritage Commission
- California Department of Conservation, Division of Oil, Gas, and Geothermal Resources

CPUC also received a comment letter from the Xolon Salinan tribe.

Specific comments within letters received during scoping covered a wide range of topics. The most common generalized comments received are provided in Table 1-1 below. Key concepts and phrases within the comments are shown in **bold**.

Table 1-1. Most Common Generalized Scoping Comments by Number of Commenters

Comment	No. of Commenters
The proposed overhead power lines would have aesthetic impacts and be out of scale with the community.	23
Overhead power lines should be placed underground to reduce aesthetic impacts and/or minimize fire risk.	16
Overhead power lines could present hazards associated with electromagnetic fields .	15
The addition of overhead power lines could decrease property values for nearby properties.	11
The overhead power lines could present a fire hazard risk (e.g., if they were downed in an earthquake or high winds).	9
General opposition to the Proposed Project power line route.	8
The overhead power lines would have noise impacts from the “buzzing” during operation.	7
Why is the project needed? The rationale for the Proposed Project is not well-founded.	6
The overhead power lines could adversely affect the flight path for CAL FIRE helicopters accessing the pond by the Circle B properties.	6

Comment	No. of Commenters
The Project 70 kV route alignments could necessitate removal of oak trees .	5
The Proposed Project and alternatives could impact bald and golden eagles in the area.	5
Project construction ground-disturbing activities could impact cultural resources .	4
Project construction activities could result in noise impacts .	4
There would be traffic impacts during Project construction.	4
Support for the Proposed Project power line route.	4

As shown in Table 1-1, many of the comments received during the scoping period related to potential impacts (e.g., aesthetic impacts, fire hazard risk, noise impacts, etc.) of the overhead power lines associated with the Proposed Project and alternatives. One of the most common generalized comments received suggested the proposed overhead power lines should be placed underground.

1.2.4 Draft Alternatives Screening Report Review Period

To identify a reasonable range of potentially feasible alternatives for consideration in the DEIR, an Alternatives Screening Report (ASR) was prepared. To provide an opportunity for the public to review and comment on the CPUC's preliminary alternatives screening process and results, a Draft ASR was circulated for public review from March 28, 2019, to May 10, 2019. CPUC received a large number of comments during the Draft ASR review period, including support and opposition for various alternatives and concerns regarding environmental impacts associated with different alternatives. The comments on the Draft ASR were considered by the CPUC during preparation of the Final ASR, which is included as Appendix B to this DEIR.

An analysis of behind-the-meter (BTM) solar and battery storage adoption propensity (BTM Report) was also prepared and circulated to the public as a supplement to the original Draft ASR. A public notice regarding the availability of the BTM Report on the Project website was distributed on January 31, 2020. The BTM Report is included as Appendix B to the Final ASR.

1.2.5 Public Review of the Draft Environmental Impact Report

This DEIR has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of CEQA. In preparing the DEIR, CPUC considered the comments received during the scoping period, as well as input from responsible agencies and other stakeholders. The DEIR represents the CPUC's independent analysis and judgment of the potential environmental impacts of the Proposed Project, reasonably foreseeable distribution components, and alternatives.

The DEIR is currently undergoing public review for 55 days. During this period, CPUC will hold two public meetings, which, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, will be virtual meetings.

The meetings will begin with a brief overview of the Proposed Project, reasonably foreseeable distribution components, and alternatives, and the analysis and conclusions set forth in the DEIR. This introductory presentation will then be followed by an opportunity for interested members of the public to provide comments to CPUC regarding the Proposed Project and the DEIR. If comments from individual members of the public cannot be accommodated during the virtual meetings, individuals will be directed to submit written comments via email or U.S. mail during the public review period. The logistics for the public meeting will be published in local newspapers prior to the event and are included in the notice of availability (NOA) of this DEIR.

Section 1.4 describes how to provide comments on this DEIR.

1.2.6 Preparation of the Final Environmental Impact Report

Written and oral comments received in response to the DEIR will be addressed in a response-to-comments document which, together with the DEIR and any related changes to the substantive discussion in the DEIR, will constitute the final environmental impact report (FEIR). The FEIR, in turn, will inform CPUC's exercise of its discretion as a lead agency under CEQA in deciding whether or how to approve the Proposed Project or select one or more of the alternatives for implementation.

1.3 Organization of this DEIR

This DEIR consists of the following components:

Volume I – Main Body

Executive Summary. This chapter provides a summary of the Proposed Project, reasonably foreseeable distribution components, and project alternatives; describes the public process conducted for the DEIR, the known issues of concern, and the identified environmentally superior alternative; and provides a summary of environmental impacts and mitigation measures.

Chapter 1, Introduction. This chapter describes the purpose and organization of the DEIR and its preparation, review, and certification process.

Chapter 2, Project Description. This chapter summarizes the Proposed Project, including a description of the Proposed Project's purpose and objectives, a brief description of the Proposed Project area, components, construction activities and construction schedule, operations, the permits and approvals that would be required to implement the Proposed Project, and Applicant-proposed measures for resource protection. Chapter 2 also describes the reasonably foreseeable distribution components that would be developed as a result of the Proposed Project.

Chapter 3, Alternatives Description. This chapter describes the alternatives to the Proposed Project that have been carried forward for full analysis in the DEIR, including the principal components of the alternatives, their locations, construction schedules, etc.

Chapter 4, *Environmental Analysis*. This chapter describes the environmental resources and potential environmental impacts of the Proposed Project, reasonably foreseeable distribution components, and alternatives. Each topical resource section (4.1 through 4.20) describes the existing setting and background information for the resource under consideration. Each section then discusses the environmental impacts of the Proposed Project, reasonably foreseeable distribution components, and alternatives and provides significance determinations based on the CEQA Guidelines Appendix G significance criteria.

Chapter 5, *Alternatives Analysis Summary and Comparison of Alternatives*. This chapter provides a summary of the potential impacts of the respective alternatives (which are evaluated in detail in Chapter 4) and alternative combinations and compares the impacts to the Proposed Project. The chapter then discusses the environmentally superior alternative and estimated costs associated with the different alternative combinations.

Chapter 6, *Other Statutory Considerations and Cumulative Impacts*. This chapter addresses the 'potential for the Proposed Project, reasonably foreseeable distribution components, and alternatives to contribute to cumulative impacts. This chapter also outlines the Proposed Project's potential to induce growth and identifies significant, irreversible environmental changes resulting from the Proposed Project, reasonably foreseeable distribution components, and alternatives.

Chapter 7, *Report Preparation*. This chapter lists the individuals involved in preparing the DEIR.

Chapter 8, *References*. This chapter provides a bibliography of printed references, websites, and personal communications used in preparing this DEIR.

Volume II – Appendices

Appendix A summarizes applicable local laws, regulations, and policies.

Appendix B is the Final Alternatives Screening Report, which identified the alternatives carried forward for full analysis in the DEIR.

Appendix C contains the air quality, energy, and greenhouse gas emission calculations.

Appendix D presents supporting documentation related to the evaluation of potential impacts on vegetation and wildlife.

Appendix E contains the noise analysis calculations.

Appendix F is the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program, which lists the mitigation measures identified in Volume I of the DEIR and describes specific steps for their implementation.

1.4 Submittal of Comments

CPUC is circulating this DEIR for a 55-day public review and comment period, as indicated in the NOA. As discussed above, CPUC will host two public meetings during this period, which will be virtual (online) meetings. The purpose of public circulation and the public meetings is to provide agencies and interested individuals with opportunities to comment on or express concerns regarding the contents of this DEIR. The logistics for the public meetings will be provided in the NOA, on CPUC's website, and in a newspaper advertisement.

Written comments concerning this DEIR can be submitted at the public meeting or at any time during the DEIR public review period. All comments must be received by the deadline indicated in the NOA, directed to the name and address listed below:

Robert Peterson, Project Manager
c/o Tom Engels
Horizon Water and Environment
P.O. Box 2727, Oakland, CA 94602
266 Grand Avenue, Suite 210
Oakland, CA 94610

estrellaproject@horizonh2o.com

Submittal of written comments via e-mail (Microsoft Word or PDF format) would be greatly appreciated. Written comments received in response to this DEIR during the public review period will be addressed in a response-to-comments section of the FEIR.

All documents mentioned herein or related to the Proposed Project can be reviewed online at the following website:

www.cpuc.ca.gov/environment/info/horizonh2o/estrella/index.html

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