



**COUNTY OF NEVADA
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AGENCY
PLANNING DEPARTMENT**

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Trisha Tillotson
Community Development Agency Director

Brian Foss
Planning Director

Date: December 17, 2021

To: Responsible Agencies, Organizations, and Interested Parties

From: County of Nevada

Contact: Brian Foss, Planning Director
Planning Department
Community Development Agency
950 Maidu Avenue, Suite 170
Nevada City, CA 95959

Subject: Draft Environmental Impact Report for the Nevada County Broadband Project

In discharging its duties under Section 15021 of the State California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines, the County of Nevada (County), as lead agency, intends to prepare an environmental impact report (EIR), consistent with CEQA (Public Resources Code [PRC] Section 21000 et seq.) and the State CEQA Guidelines (California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Chapter 3, Section 1500, et seq.), that addresses the potential physical environmental effects of the Nevada County Broadband Project (proposed program) and the Spiral Fiber Broadband Project (proposed project). In accordance with State CEQA Guidelines Section 15082, the County has prepared this Notice of Preparation (NOP) to provide responsible agencies and other interested parties with sufficient information describing the proposal and its potential environmental effects to meaningfully respond. For more information about the project characteristics please visit <https://www.mynevadacounty.com/513/Projects-Supporting-Documents>.

As specified by the State CEQA Guidelines, the NOP will be circulated for a 33-day review period. The County welcomes public input during this review. If no response or request for additional time is received from any responsible agency by the end of the review period, the lead agency may presume that the responsible agency has no response.

Written and/or email comments in response to this NOP should be provided to the County at the earliest possible date but must be received by 5:00 p.m. on **January 18, 2022**. Please send all written and email comments to:

Brian Foss, Planning Director
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Nevada City, CA 95959
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Email: Brian.Foss@co.nevada.ca.us

Agencies that will need to consider the EIR when deciding whether to issue permits or other approvals for the proposed project should provide the name of a contact person. Comments provided by email should include "Nevada County Broadband Project NOP Scoping Comment" in the subject line, and the name and mailing address of the commenter in the body of the email.

Project Location

The proposed project area includes much of Nevada County, located in the Sierra Nevada and foothills, approximately 30 miles northeast of Sacramento at its closest approach (Figure 1). The area in which future broadband projects could be implemented includes unincorporated areas of the county, City of Grass Valley, Nevada City, and Town of Truckee (Figure 2); it excludes federal lands and highway rights of way. Unincorporated areas expected to be served by future broadband projects include the Donner Pass Road area (including the Serene Lakes area), Kingvale, Soda Springs, Cisco Grove, Washington, and other small communities. The exact alignments of future broadband projects are unknown at this time and would be based on such considerations as construction feasibility, local preference, and locations of sensitive environmental resources. The fiber optic lines would be installed underground in roadway shoulders such that disturbance of roadway surfaces can be largely avoided; however, it is possible some fiber optic line could be installed directly under roadways in areas with limited shoulder space or where existing conduit under the road may be used, avoiding new surface disturbance. Where subsurface installation of fiber optic cable is infeasible, aerial installation on new or existing poles would occur.

The Spiral Fiber project area is located in Nevada City and nearby unincorporated areas to the west, north, and northeast, including the rural, unincorporated communities of Newtown, Willow Valley, Harmony Ridge, Blue Tent, and White Spot (Figure 3).

Project Background and Need

Broadband provides high speed internet access via multiple types of technologies, including fiber optics, wireless, cable, DSL, and satellite. While some areas of the County have sufficient internet speeds for daily work and home life, there are still large portions of the county with no coverage or coverage so slow that it has become prohibitive to perform daily, essential tasks.

The ability to provide broadband internet in the County has been challenging for a several reasons. Primarily, the topography and geography of the county present barriers to the broadband connectivity. Subsurface rock throughout the county is difficult and expensive to trench and dense forests, hills, and canyons obstruct the lines-of-site needed for wireless technology. Also, the rural nature of the county does not support the population density needed to show sufficient returns on investment for some broadband project investors.

Since 2000, the County has played an active role in promoting increased local broadband coverage. Some of the actions and policies that have been implemented to support broadband service and infrastructure include:

- providing grants to fund broadband projects implemented by local internet service providers.
- approving road standards to support an open trench "Dig Once" policy, which maximizes the potential for broadband to be included in any open trench construction activity taking place in the unincorporated county.
- approving the Nevada County Broadband Strategy Plan—a plan created by the Sierra Business Council that outlines various strategies for how broadband can be improved and expanded across the county.
- approving the Last-Mile Broadband Grant—a pilot program to leverage county funds to support the development of Last-Mile Broadband infrastructure in the unincorporated areas of the county to promote economic development. Last-Mile refers to connecting the end-user or customer's home or business to a local network provider. The development of Last-Mile transmission networks is the most cost-prohibitive component of broadband expansion in the County.

Expansion of broadband service and infrastructure is vital to the communities in the County for many reasons, which include:

- building social and community connections,
- civic engagement and participation,
- economic development and sustainability,
- education and continuous learning,
- health care and tele-health services, and
- recreation and entertainment.

Project Characteristics

As lead agency, the County is proposing a program to expand access to broadband technology throughout the county, including unincorporated areas and the three incorporated cities: Grass Valley, Nevada City, and the Town of Truckee. Installation of fiber optic cable by a variety of potential methods (e.g., underground via directional bore and trenching, and aerial installation) will be evaluated at a programmatic level in the EIR for the county as a whole, and one near-term project, the Spiral Fiber Broadband Project, is advanced enough in its design and engineering to be evaluated at a project-specific level (unless otherwise noted, collectively referred to herein as the project).

The countywide program would install new fiber conduit predominantly underground along roadway rights-of-way and where existing conduit exists, new fiber could be installed in existing conduit, which would minimize ground disturbance. In some circumstances, fiber optic conduit could be installed under roadways where space is limited alongside the roadways. Access to the new conduits would be provided by installing access boxes (vaults) at intervals of not more than 3,000 feet along a proposed route for an individual project. Where topography or underground substrate would prohibit or impede construction of subsurface fiber optic lines, projects would install aboveground fiber optic line that would utilize existing or newly constructed utility poles.

The Spiral Fiber project would develop an estimated approximately 240 miles of underground fiber optic line, including about 220 miles of trunk line and 17 miles of service connections. The fiber optic line would use XGS-PON network architecture, which means it would support a higher speed 10 gigabit-enabled network. No aboveground fiber optic line would be included in the Spiral Fiber project. Similar to the facilities expected to be constructed elsewhere in the County, the Spiral Fiber project would include construction of new fiber conduit primarily along roadway rights-of-way; however, the fiber optic trunk lines and service connections would require in-road installation in locations throughout the proposed project area. The Spiral Fiber project would finance, construct, and operate an underground fiber optic internet network that would connect 10,000 homes and 400 businesses with high-speed internet access.

The objective of this EIR is to achieve compliance with CEQA for the proposed countywide program in advance such that individual fiber installers can take advantage of grant funding expected to be available through the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF). CETF provides leadership statewide to close the “digital divide” by accelerating the deployment and adoption of broadband to unserved and underserved communities and populations.

Required Approvals

Actions that would be required from the County may include the following for the proposed project:

- certification of the EIR,
- adoption of a Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program,
- adoption of CEQA findings, and
- approval of a use permit and an encroachment permit.

Depending on the project-specific character, location, and construction techniques of future broadband projects, potential permits and approvals that could be required are identified in Table 1.

Table 1 Potential Permits and Approvals

Agency	Permits or Approvals
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nationwide Permit or Individual Permit under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act
Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Pollutant Discharge Elimination Construction General Permit • Section 401 water quality certification or a waiver of discharge requirements
Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Pollutant Discharge Elimination Construction General Permit • Section 401 water quality certification or a waiver of discharge requirements
California Department of Fish and Wildlife	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lake and streambed alteration agreement p Section 1602 of the Fish and Game Code
City of Grass Valley	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use permits, encroachment permits
Nevada City	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use permits, encroachment permits
Town of Truckee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use permits, encroachment permits

Potential Environmental Effects

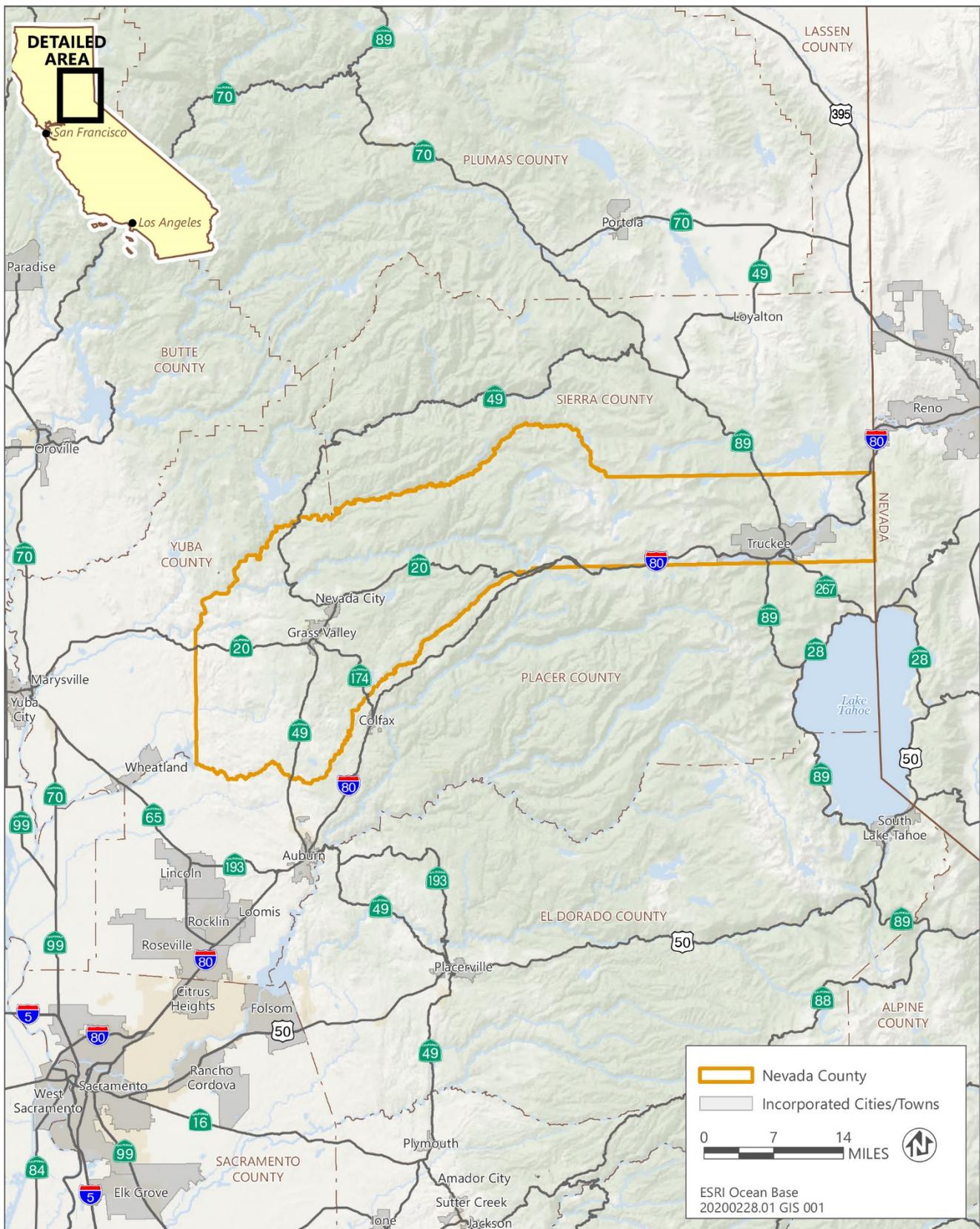
The EIR will consider the potential for direct, indirect, and cumulative effects for both construction and operational phases on the topics listed below.

- Aesthetics
- Air Quality
- Biological Resources
- Cultural Resources
- Geology and Soils
- Greenhouse Gas Emissions
- Hazards and Hazardous Materials
- Hydrology and Water Quality
- Noise
- Transportation and Traffic
- Tribal Cultural Resources
- Utilities and Service Systems
- Wildfire

The State CEQA Guidelines (Section 15128) allow an EIR to identify environmental effects that were determined to not be significant and to briefly describe the reasons. Such effects will be dismissed from detailed review in the environmental document and would include agricultural and forestry resources, land use and planning, mineral resources, population and housing, public services, and recreation.

Alternatives

In accordance with Section 15126.6 of the State CEQA Guidelines, an EIR must “describe a range of reasonable alternatives to the project, or to the location of the project, which would feasibly attain most of the basic objectives of the project but would avoid or substantially lessen any of the significant effects of the project and evaluate the comparative merits of the alternatives.” As required by CEQA, the EIR will evaluate a No Project Alternative. Aside from the No Project Alternative, the County has not yet determined what additional alternatives to the project will be evaluated in the EIR. These will be identified during the environmental review process. Once selected, the alternatives will be analyzed at a qualitative level of detail in the Draft EIR for comparison against the impacts identified for the project, consistent with the requirements of CEQA.



Source: Adapted by Ascent in 2021

Figure 1 Regional Location

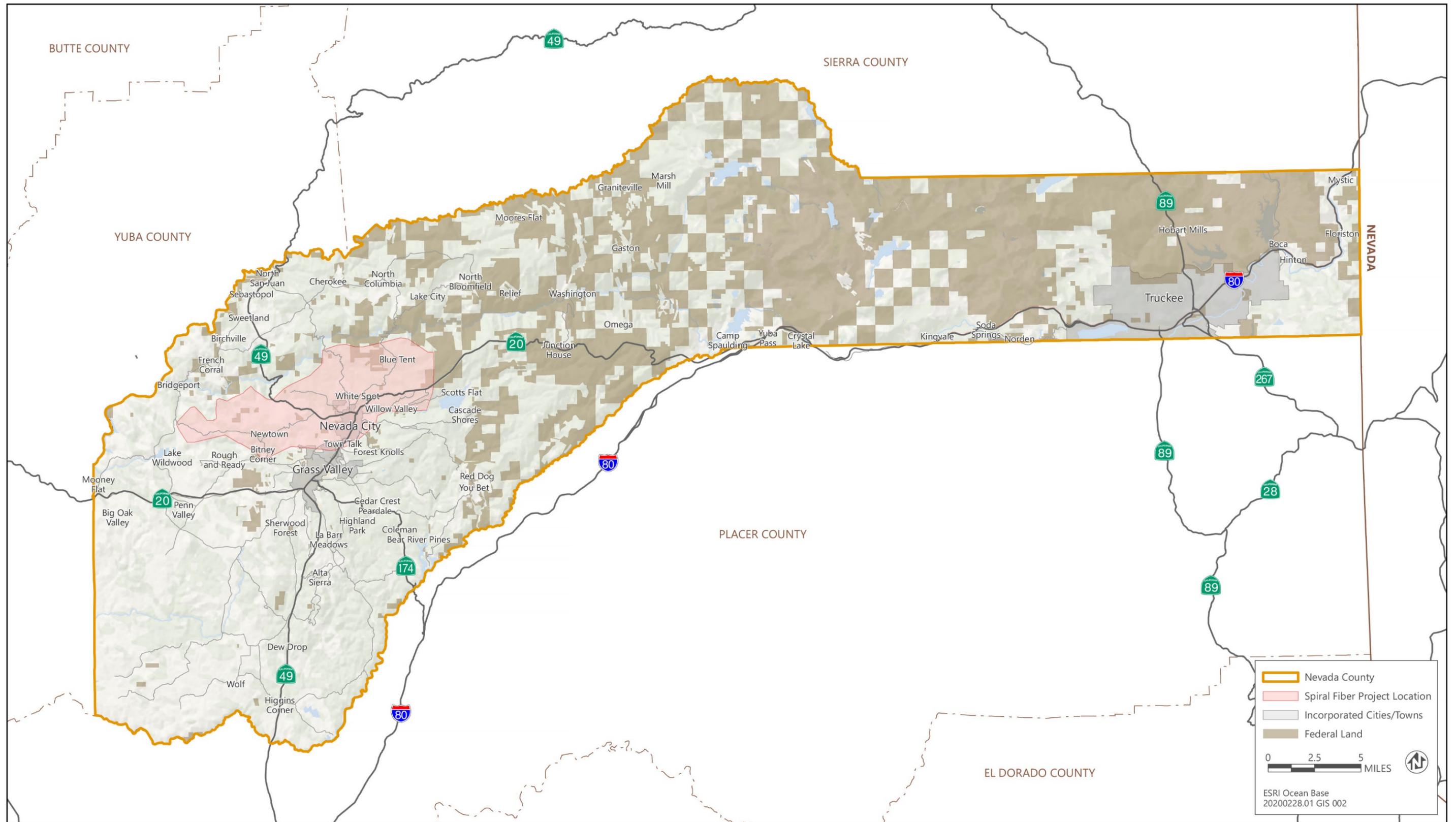
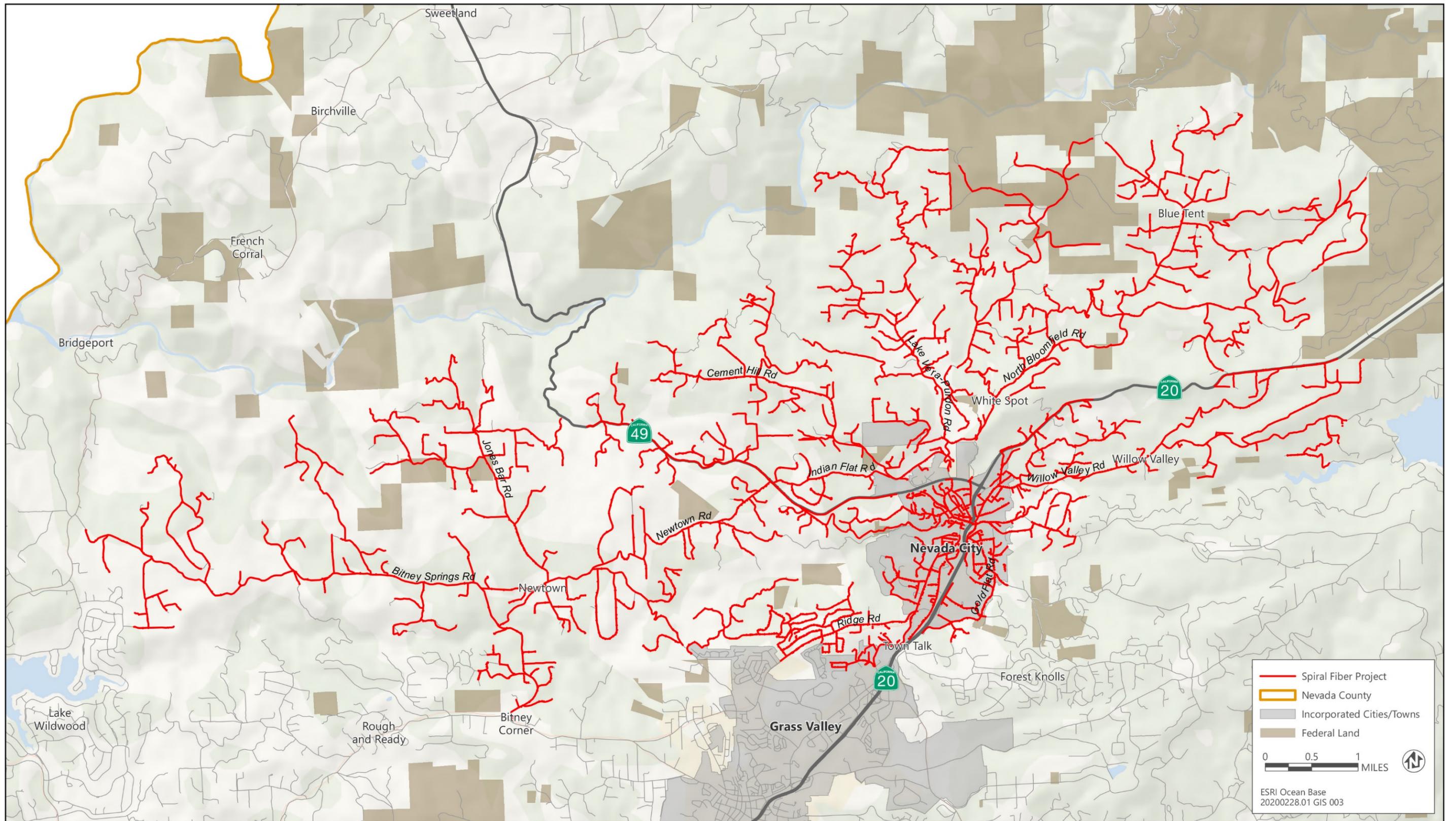


Figure 2 Proposed Program Location



Source: Adapted by Ascent in 2021