

NOTICE OF PREPARATION AND SCOPING MEETING

County of Tuolumne Broadband Infrastructure Environmental Impact Report

Project Title:	County of Tuolumne Broadband Infrastructure Environmental Impact Report
Project Applicant:	County of Tuolumne
Comment Period:	May 1, 2023 – May 30, 2023
Scoping Meeting:	May 10, 2023
Lead Agency:	County of Tuolumne
Contact (CEQA):	Quincy Yaley, Director County of Tuolumne, Community Development Department 2 South Green Street Sonora, CA 95370 gyaley@co.tuolumne.ca.us
Contact (NEPA):	Marina MacLatchie, Federal Program Officer National Telecommunications and Information Administration mmaclatchie@ntia.gov

Notice is hereby given that the County of Tuolumne (County) will be the Lead Agency in preparation of a program Environmental Impact Report (EIR) consistent with California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines (14 California Code of Regulations Section 1500, et seq.), that addresses the potential physical environmental effects of a countywide Broadband Infrastructure Environmental Impact Report Project (proposed project). In accordance with CEQA Guidelines Section 15082, the County has prepared this Notice of Preparation (NOP), along with the subsequent Initial Study (IS) (Appendix A) to provide responsible agencies and other interested parties with sufficient information describing the proposal and its potential environmental effects to meaningfully respond. Additionally, an Environmental Assessment (EA) will be appended to the program EIR as required for the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program. The EA will be prepared with the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NITA) (under provision of the U.S. Department of Commerce) as the Federal Lead and will be consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

PROJECT SETTING AND LOCATION

The proposed project area would be located within Tuolumne County limits. Tuolumne County, California is located in the center of the California Mother Lode region, along the western slope of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Tuolumne County is bordered to the north by Alpine and Calaveras Counties, to the west by Calaveras and Stanislaus Counties, to the south by Merced and Mariposa Counties, and to the east by Mono County. Sonora is the only incorporated city within the County; however, there are other several unincorporated communities located throughout the County, such as Jamestown, Columbia, Tuolumne City, Groveland, and Twain Harte. Tuolumne County encompasses approximately 2,274 total square miles, or 1,455,360 acres.

The area in which future broadband infrastructure could be implemented includes all unincorporated areas of the County and the incorporated City of Sonora; it excludes federal lands, private roads, and

state highway rights-of-way. The County has jurisdiction over a total of approximately 610 miles of County-maintained roads. It is envisioned that the vast majority of the future broadband infrastructure would be installed within existing County maintained road rights-of-way (ROW), public utility easements (PUE), and/or overhead public utility easements of record throughout the County. The exact alignments of future broadband are unknown at this time and would be planned based on such considerations as construction feasibility, local preference, and locations of sensitive environmental resources.

PROJECT BACKGROUND AND NEED

Broadband provides high-speed internet access via multiple types of technologies, including fiber optics, wireless, cable, digital subscriber line (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 physical barriers to broadband connectivity. Subsurface rock throughout the County is difficult and expensive to trench while dense forests, hills, and canyons may obstruct the sight lines needed for wireless technology. Finally, the rural nature of the County results in low population densities to attract market-rate broadband infrastructure investors.

Currently, Tuolumne County has 13,826 Broadband Service Locations (BSL) (or 45 percent of all BSL within the County) that lack access to wireline broadband of speeds of up to 25/3 megabits per second (Mbps). Areas are considered “unserved” per the State of California definition of having less than 25/3 Mbps of service. These pockets of unserved, or even underserved, populations in California are missing out on what is now seen as a utility critical to quality of life. This Countywide project would help attract broadband infrastructure investors to bring broadband service to a County in need of reliable connectivity for increasing health and safety factors, as well as for economic and quality of life reasons. Expansion of broadband service and its associated infrastructure is vital to the various communities in the County for many reasons, which include:

- building social and community connections,
- enhancing civic engagement and participation,
- bolstering economic development and sustainability,
- increasing education and continuous learning,
- fostering health care and tele-health services, and
- promoting recreation and tourism.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

As the Lead Agency, the County is proposing to expand access to broadband technology throughout County, including the unincorporated areas of the County and the one incorporated City of Sonora. Location and installation of fiber optic cable by a variety of potential methods (e.g., underground, and aerial installation) would be evaluated at a programmatic level in the EIR for the County as a whole.

The Countywide program would install fiber optic conduit either underground in buried conduits, overhead on pole lines, or in a combination of both. In some circumstances, fiber optic conduit could be installed under roadways where space is limited alongside the roadways. Where topography or

underground substrate would prohibit or impede construction of subsurface fiber optic cables, projects would install aboveground fiber optic cables that would utilize existing or newly constructed utility poles.

The County includes a total of approximately 610 miles of County-maintained roads. The installation of underground or overhead cables would be located within existing County maintained road ROW, public utility easements, and/or overhead public utility easements of record throughout the County. The future location of broadband infrastructure would focus on areas of the County that are currently unserved or underserved. The exact alignment of future broadband infrastructure is unknown at this time and would be based on such considerations as construction feasibility, local preference, and locations of sensitive environmental resources.

The objective of this programmatic level 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
U.S. Forest Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction easements
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
California Department of Fish and Wildlife	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lake and streambed alteration agreement Section 1602 of the Fish and Game Code
City of Sonora	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use permits, encroachment permits
County of Tuolumne	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use permits, encroachment permits

EIR SCOPE

The EIR will evaluate the proposed project for potential impacts on the environment and determine the potential environmental consequences of future change. The attached Initial Study (Appendix A) identifies environmental topics that the County anticipates will be addressed in the EIR. Project impacts

identified in the Initial Study which would result in either “no impact” or a “less than significant impact” would not be further addressed in the EIR unless otherwise noted in the Initial Study or unless a comment is received on the NOP/IS requesting the issue be further analyzed in the EIR. The Initial Study notes that these environmental topics will be further addressed in the EIR:

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

Cumulative impacts will consider impacts of relevant projects in and around the project area combined with those of the project. An evaluation of project alternatives that could reduce significant impacts will also be included in the EIR.

To ensure that the EIR for this proposed project is thorough and adequate and ensure that the issues of concern to the public and public agencies are addressed, the County is requesting comments and guidance on the scope and content of the EIR from interested public agencies, organizations, and individuals. Public comments on the scope of issues to be evaluated in the EIR are encouraged. With respect to the views of Responsible and Trustee Agencies as to significant environmental issues, the County needs to know the reasonable alternatives and mitigation measures that are germane to each agency's statutory responsibilities in connection with the project.

ALTERNATIVES

In accordance with Section 15126.6 of the 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.

SCOPING MEETING

A Public Scoping Meeting would be held on May 10, 2023 from 6:30pm-8:30pm in the Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors chambers located at 2 South Green Street, Sonora, CA. No additional scoping meeting is currently planned for this time.

PUBLIC REVIEW PERIOD

As specified by the CEQA Guidelines, the NOP will be circulated for a 30-day review period. The public review period is from May 1, 2023 to May 30, 2023. Please send all written comments to Quincy Yaley, County of Tuolumne, at the address shown above or email to qyaley@co.tuolumne.ca.us with “County

of Tuolumne Broadband Infrastructure Environmental Impact Report” as the subject. Public agencies providing comments are asked to include a contact person for the agency.

Comments on the NOP are due no later than the close of the 30-day review period at 4:00 p.m. on May 30, 2023.