
INTERNET FOR ALL

Finding of No Significant Impact

*Nebraska Indian Community College
(NT22TBC0290068-T1-01)*



U.S. Department of Commerce
National Telecommunications and Information Administration

Finding of No Significant Impact

National Telecommunications and Information Administration

Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program

Nebraska Indian Community College Broadband Initiative

Overview

This document serves as the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the following project awarded by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA). NTIA has completed the sufficiency review of the recipient's Environmental Assessment (EA) and has determined that the project will not have a significant impact on the environment. The FONSI contains information related to the review.

Recipient Name:	Nebraska Indian Community College
Grant Project Name:	Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program
Grant Award No.	NT22TBC0290068-T1-01
Program Location:	Niobrara, Nebraska

Program Summary

The NTIA awarded a grant to the Nebraska Indian Community College (NICC), through the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (TBCP), as authorized by the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, Division N, Title IX, Section 905(c), Public Law 116-260, 134 Stat. 1182 (Dec. 27, 2020) (Act). TBCP provides new federal funding for grants to eligible entities to expand access to and adoption of: (i) broadband service on Tribal Land; or (ii) for programs that promote the use of broadband to access remote learning, telework, or telehealth resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. The project is called the NICC Broadband Initiative and proposed activities are scheduled to occur in Niobrara, Nebraska within the Santee Sioux Nation (SSN).

The NICC completed an EA for this project. NTIA reviewed the EA, determined it is sufficient, and adopted it as part of the development of this FONSI.

The Project includes:

Project Activity 1 (Preferred Alternative): The project includes the construction of three, 195-foot direct embedded, three-legged, self-support towers and associated equipment as a Transmission and Receiving Site for microwave broadband. Microwave Internet or Wireless Access (WLA) is a fixed wireless broadband connection delivered by high-capacity microwave radio link, which does not require any other infrastructure other than power, and a clear or near line of sight.

The three sites were selected over other sites because they provide the best "line of sight", meaning that the microwaves can pass between the tower and buildings to be served without

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obstruction from trees or terrain. The proposed tower sites are as follows: Tower 1 is located at Latitude 42.794474 and Longitude at -97.784320, Tower 2 is located at Latitude 42.741719 and Longitude -97.906551, and Tower 3 is located at Latitude 42.68401 and Longitude -97.779723. A gravel access road will be used for site access for construction and operational maintenance. Total construction time will be less than 30 days for all three towers. The areas surrounding the proposed three tower sites are all dominated by agricultural land. Tower 1 has one wetland located less than 1 mile from the proposed tower site; compared to Towers 2 and 3 both have three wetlands less than 1 mile from their proposed tower sites. Total ground disturbance will be less than 300 square feet for all three towers.

Based on a review of the analysis in the EA, NTIA has determined that the project, implemented in accordance with the preferred alternative, and incorporating best management practices (BMPs) and protective measures identified in the EA, will not result in any significant environmental impacts. Therefore, the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required. The basis for this determination is described in this FONSI.

Additional information and copies of the Executive Summary of the EA and FONSI are available to all interested persons and the public through the NTIA website (<https://broadbandusa.ntia.gov/funding-programs/documentation-and-reporting>) and the following contact:

Amanda Pereira

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National Telecommunications and Information Administration
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Project Purpose and Need

The purpose of the project is to provide high speed broadband fiber optic service to the NICC located within the SSN. People living on Tribal lands are among the hardest to reach in the United States with broadband service. Tribal lands experience lower rates of both fixed and mobile broadband deployment as compared to non-tribal areas, particularly in rural areas. These areas are expensive to serve with broadband. There is typically rugged terrain, complex permitting processes governing access to tribal lands, lack of necessary infrastructure and typically more residential than business customers. When factoring in high poverty and low income, the widespread availability of broadband to Tribal residents has been cost prohibitive.

In March of 2020, most of NICC’s student body did not have technology access or reliable Internet access at their residence other than a smart phone from month to month. More than 80% of the college’s students qualify for federal student aid. The Santee Nation’s reservation was served by at least two Internet providers; however, costs were prohibitive. Affordability and lack of basic broadband access are a significant deterrent for low-income learners on the Santee Sioux Nation Reservation. NICC transitioned to remote learning as did most of the K-12 institutions during the Covid crisis. NICC serves Native Americans living in communities with a higher poverty than the national average. Educational opportunities offer a critically needed avenue to work in fields that can break the cycle of poverty and lack the knowledge or resources of how to apply to more prestigious institutions, such as how to navigate financial aid.

NICC, Omaha Tribe of Nebraska, Santee Sioux Nation, Umonhon Nation Public School, Santee Public School, Walthill Public School, Bancroft Rosalie Public School, and Pender Public Schools have created a Tribal Broadband Wireless Network. Currently, the network offers speeds of 20 Mbps down and 5 Mbps up. The transmission equipment is located at each school. The students, K-14, who live and reside within the boundaries of the SSN Reservation and are located within near line of sight of a transmission site 5 to 7 miles away, can access free Internet for educational purposes. This project will provide Internet access to a grossly underserved and unserved community and a vital tool for NICC students needing to use home Internet to access school curriculum from home for continuing education.

Project Description

The project will strengthen Internet services to reach all households on the SSN Reservation and students attending the NICC, so that all K-14 students will have access to the Internet and its resources. This project not only extends the reach of the current network but should also enhance bandwidth to increase speeds above the 25 Mbps limit that classifies this as broadband. The project will provide new or enhanced coverage of Internet services to NICC students and Tribal members living within the boundaries of the SSN reservation. The towers are a necessity for reliable and resourceful Internet service to the underserved and unserved community. They will also be a vital tool for students of NICC continuing education needs for remote learning.

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The project includes the construction of three, 195-foot direct embedded, three-legged, self-support towers and associated equipment as a Transmission and Receiving Site for microwave broadband within the SSN. Microwave Internet or Wireless Access (WLA) is a fixed wireless broadband connection delivered by high-capacity microwave radio link, which does not require any other infrastructure other than power (accessed from road utility lines), and a clear or near line of sight. Each tower site will require soil excavation for installation of concrete foundations to support the new towers. Construction disturbance would be less than 100 square feet and excavation of soil for the foundations would be approximately 2 cubic yards of soil, to be later used as backfill. BMPs for erosion control during construction would include silt fencing, straw bales, and mulch, with all construction monitored by the SSN Tribal Response Program Manager.

The three tower sites were selected over other sites because they provide the best “line of sight”, meaning that the microwaves can pass between the tower and buildings to be served without obstruction from trees or landforms. The proposed tower sites are as follows: Tower 1 is located at Latitude 42.794474 and Longitude at -97.784320, Tower 2 is located at Latitude 42.741719 and Longitude -97.906551, and Tower 3 is located at Latitude 42.68401 and Longitude -97.779723. An existing gravel access road will be used for site access for construction and operational maintenance. Total construction time will be less than 30 days for all three towers. The areas surrounding the proposed three tower sites are all dominated by non-prime agricultural land. Total Ground disturbance will be less than 300 square feet for the permanent placement of all three towers.

Analysis of Alternatives

The NICC EA includes an analysis of the alternatives for implementing the project to meet the purpose and need. NTIA conducted a review of the recipient’s analysis of alternatives for implementing the project to meet the purpose and need, including a review of the “no action” alternative, where applicable. Each alternative was evaluated for impacts against the “no action” alternative and impacts from other alternatives, as a component of selecting the preferred alternative. The following summarizes the alternatives analyzed in the EA.

Alternative (Preferred Alternative): The project proposes to construct three, 195-foot direct embedded, three-legged, self-support towers and associated equipment as a transmission and Receiving Site for microwave broadband. Microwave Internet or Wireless Access (WLA) is a fixed wireless broadband connection delivered by high-capacity microwave radio link, which does not require any other infrastructure other than power, and a clear or near line of sight.

Site selection criteria included best “line of sight”, meaning that the microwaves can pass between the tower and buildings to be served without obstruction from trees or landforms. The proposed tower sites are as follows: Tower 1 is located at Latitude 42.794474 and Longitude at -97.784320, Tower 2 is located at Latitude 42.741719 and Longitude -97.906551, and Tower 3 is located at Latitude 42.68401 and Longitude -97.779723. An existing gravel access road (with utilities) will be used for site access for construction and operational maintenance. Total construction time will be less than 30 days for all three towers. The areas surrounding the proposed three tower sites are all dominated by non-prime agricultural land. Total ground disturbance will be less than 300 square feet for all three towers.

No Action Alternative: The no action alternative was also considered. This alternative represents conditions as they currently exist. The EA examined this alternative as the baseline for evaluating impacts relative to other alternatives being considered. Under the No-Action Alternative, there would be no change in the unreliable and limited Internet service at NICC and for the SSN. This alternative would not address the growing needs of NICC and the Native population. Both entities would continue to function with limited or no Internet capabilities.

Alternatives Considered but Not Carried Forward: NICC also considered the following alternative:

The alternative considered but not forwarded for further analysis consisted of the services potentially being provided by a third-party telecommunications company within the boundaries of the Santee Sioux Nation Reservation. NICC eliminated this alternative from further consideration based on the following reason: while the alternative would meet the project purpose, as Great Plains Communications, located in Blair, Nebraska, could provide the upgraded services, the alternative would require underground fiber optic options which would likely cause more disturbances of natural habitats and possibly impact threatened or endangered species. Also, this alternative would not be economically feasible as it would require NICC and the residents of the SSN to pay monthly subscriptions for the service. Separate agreements would also be required with numerous different landowners to secure rights-of-way and leases to accommodate deploying a buried cable network. This alternative would potentially have a significant negative impact, economically and environmentally, which makes this alternative less preferable.

Findings and Conclusions

The EA analyzed existing conditions and environmental consequences of the preferred alternative, and the no action alternative for potential impacts in the major resource areas of Noise, Air Quality (including greenhouse gases [GHGs]), Geology and Soils, Water Resources, Biological Resources, Historic and Cultural Resources, Aesthetic and Visual Resources, Land Use, Infrastructure, Socioeconomic Resources, and Human Health and Safety. The results of the analysis are summarized in the table below:

Resource Area	Preferred Alternative	No Action Alternative
Noise	No Significant Impact	No Significant Impact
Air Quality (including greenhouse gases [GHGs])	No Significant Impact	No Significant Impact
Geology and Soils	No Significant Impact	No Significant Impact
Water Resources	No Significant Impact	No Significant Impact
Biological Resources	No Significant Impact	No Significant Impact
Historic and Cultural Resources	No Significant Impact	No Significant Impact
Aesthetic and Visual Resources	No Significant Impact	No Significant Impact

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Land Use	No Significant Impact	No Significant Impact
Infrastructure	Long-Term Positive Impacts	Long Term Negative Impacts
Socioeconomic Resources	Long-Term Positive Impacts	Long Term Negative Impacts
Human Health and Safety	Long-Term Positive Impacts	Long Term Negative Impacts

The sections that follow provide a brief narrative for those resource areas where there has been a potential impact indicated in the table above and/or provide a summary of the results of required consultation with the appropriate agency or agencies.

Infrastructure

It is anticipated that the proposed action will enhance the infrastructure of the Santee Sioux Nation and NICC, by providing fixed and stable access to Internet services that are affordable. The project will improve communications infrastructure and is expected to result in improved transfer of information for education, businesses, and individuals residing within the Santee communities along the project. The project will provide long-term positive impacts and benefits to the Tribe overall. The No-Action alternative would not provide any improvement in infrastructure to the current underserved and unserved community.

Socioeconomic Resources

The implementation of the Proposed action will likely result in significant socioeconomic benefit to the Santee Sioux Nation and NICC. Increased access via high-speed Internet will substantially improve education and business opportunities. Telemedicine will become available in areas not previously served, improving the overall quality of life for the Tribe.

The no action alternative would not provide any of the opportunities previously discussed and result in the continuation of the current situation, with a lack of dependable Internet, less economic opportunity, no telemedicine, or web-based educational opportunity.

Health and Human Safety

The construction of the towers and related support systems will greatly enhance the health and human safety for the Tribe. Initiating the Proposed Action Alternative would provide the community with access to managing their healthcare online, provide telemedicine to remote areas and assist Tribal members in finding nearby healthcare facilities. This will aid in the increase of the quality of human health within the community. Better healthcare services will be more easily accessible with the implementation of improved network connectivity. Quality of safety within the community will increase with the accessibility to provide weather alerts, traffic alerts, and amber alerts via high-speed connections.



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Implementation of the no action alternative would result in negative impacts due to the lack of telemedicine opportunities and healthcare that may not be accessible. The lack of reliable Internet will limit warning systems and alerts, directly having a negative effect on the Santee people.

Cumulative Impacts

As described throughout this FONSI, the implementation of the Proposed Action will not have significant adverse impacts on any of the environmental resource areas evaluated in the EA. As such, no cumulative impacts on the environment are anticipated.

Public Comment

NTIA conducted a public comment period for the EA. Public notice was placed in the Niobrara Tribune, a local newspaper of general circulation. The notice of the proposal and EA was also posted on NTIA's website for national exposure. The notice described the proposed project and comment process and provided guidance on where to view the document and federal points of contact. The comment period began on November 23, 2023, and concluded on December 22, 2023. No comments were received by the NTIA.

Decision

NTIA concludes that constructing and operating the project as defined by the preferred alternative, identified BMPs, and protective measures, will not require additional mitigation. A separate mitigation plan is not required for the project. The analyses indicate that the Proposed Action is a major federal action that will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment. NTIA has determined that preparation of an EIS is not required.

Issued on January 5, 2024, by:

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