



Finding of No Significant Impact

Fort Belknap Indian Reservation Broadband Fiber Route Project (Grant Number: NT25TBCX029G0085-T1-01)

Lead Federal Agency

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

Cooperating Agency

U.S. Department of Interior:
Bureau of Indian Affairs - Rocky Mountain Region

NEPA Unique Identification Number: EAXX-006-60-27B-1762340261

National Telecommunications and Information Administration 1401
Constitution Ave., NW Washington, DC 20230



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FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

*NATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION
ADMINISTRATION*

TRIBAL BROADBAND CONNECTIVITY PROGRAM

*FORT BELKNAP INDIAN RESERVATION BROADBAND FIBER
ROUTE PROJECT (GRANT NUMBER: NT25TBCX029G0085-T1-01)*

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 and the NEPA cooperating agency, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), have completed the sufficiency review of the recipient’s Environmental Assessment (EA) and have determined that the project will not have a significant impact on the environment. The FONSI contains information related to the review.

Recipient Name:	The Fort Belknap Indian Community (FBIC)
Grant Project Name:	Fort Belknap Indian Reservation Broadband Fiber Route
Grant Award No.	NT25TBCX029G0085-T1-01
Program Location:	Blaine and Phillips Counties, Montana

PROGRAM SUMMARY

The NTIA awarded a grant for The Fort Belknap Indian Community (FBIC) through the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Grant 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.

The Project is called The Fort Belknap Indian Reservation Broadband Fiber Route and activities are scheduled to occur in Blaine and Phillips Counties, Montana. FBIC completed an EA for this Project in April 2026. NTIA and BIA reviewed the EA and determined it is sufficient.

The Project involves the deployment of approximately 154 miles of broadband fiber following existing utility routes, with the fiber placed 3 feet away from existing infrastructure within its own newly proposed right-of-way (ROW). Below-ground junction infrastructure such as handholes and small splice vaults (flowerpots) would be installed intermittently along the fiber route to support network operations. This network would traverse primarily rural prairie and foothill terrain with



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localized rocky soils, multiple road types, and several stream crossings. The fiber optic line would eventually extend from Highway 2 south along Highway 66 to the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, passing through the towns of Hays and Lodge Pole.

A fiber backhaul connection would link access points to the Tribe's central hub, serving as the backbone of the telecommunications network where data are processed and distributed. It involves the installation of specialized optical fiber cables that can transmit large amounts of data at high speeds over long distances using pulses of light. The fiber backhaul facility would extend from a hub location located near the parking lot of the BIA Fort Belknap Agency to the Tribe's central hub, which is situated on the Tribe's trust land. The EA addresses measures to protect and preserve significant natural, environmental, and historical resources along and within the Project ROWs. Mitigation and conservation measures, along with inadvertent discovery plans, will minimize impacts to both known and unknown natural and cultural resources.

Portions of the proposed fiber route use BIA-managed roads and cross individual land allotments held in trust for tribal members. As a result, the Fort Belknap Agency was invited and agreed to become a cooperating agency. This process solicited agency input through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Interagency review conducted.

FBIC completed the Draft EA for this Project in April 2026. The site-specific EA tiers off of the FirstNet Central Region Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) by summarizing and incorporating by reference the analyses from the PEIS where appropriate. NTIA and FBIC have reviewed the Central Region PEIS and determined that the PEIS includes detailed analyses for all applicable environmental areas of concern (resource areas) for projects in Montana. FBIC has also reviewed, and commits to adhere to, the resource area-specific best management practices (BMPs) identified in Chapter 9 of the Central Region PEIS.

Based on a review of the analysis in the EA, NTIA and BIA have determined that the Project, implemented in accordance with the preferred alternative, and incorporating 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 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

Environmental Program Officer
Office of Internet Connectivity and Growth (OICG)
National Telecommunications and Information Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce Room 4874
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20230



PROJECT PURPOSE AND NEED

NTIA

To address the need for reliable and affordable broadband service in currently unserved or underserved areas, FBIC proposes to construct a new buried broadband fiber-optic cable to provide fiber and cellular-based broadband services across the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, located in southeastern Blaine and western Phillips Counties, Montana. The Project will provide high-speed, reliable, and affordable broadband, voice, and data services to currently unserved Assiniboine and Gros Ventre Tribal members, thereby advancing digital inclusion, education, healthcare access, and economic opportunity across the Fort Belknap Reservation.

Bureau of Indian Affairs

The federal action evaluated in this EA is the BIA approval of a right-of-way under 25 CFR Part 169. In this role, BIA would review and evaluate the potential environmental impacts associated with issuing a new right-of-way for the proposed broadband fiber project.

Rural areas are consistently underserved communities as it relates to access to fiber and broadband communications infrastructure, which at one time was considered a luxury, but is now a basic utility for households and businesses. While improvements to communications technologies continue to evolve and improve, rural communities are geographically isolated with low population density, resulting in a lack of necessary investment in communications infrastructure. Further, the use of alternative means of such communication (such as satellite internet access) is prohibitively expensive for members of these communities. The lack of investment in such infrastructure results in disparities in education, economic opportunities, health, and overall quality of life for current and future members of these communities.

Current wireless coverage within the Fort Belknap Reservation is deficient. The proposed action is needed for expansion of high-speed internet access to unserved and underserved communities within the Fort Belknap Reservation. Benefits to the communities will include, but are not limited to, increased community connectivity needed for services such as telehealth, distance learning, public safety, and economic development.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Proposed Project will create 154 miles of broadband fiber placed 3 feet away from existing infrastructure within its own newly proposed ROW. As part of the proposed Project, a fiber backhaul connection would link access points to the Tribe’s central hub, serving as the backbone of the telecommunications network where data are processed and distributed. It involves the installation of specialized optical fiber cables that can transmit large amounts of data at high speeds over long distances using pulses of light. The fiber backhaul facility would extend from a hub location located near the parking lot of the Fort Belknap Agency to the Tribe’s central hub, which is situated on the Tribe’s trust land.

No new above-ground facilities or buildings are proposed as part of the fiber installation; all fiber related infrastructure would be underground or attached to existing structures.

In addition to the buried fiber conduit, below-ground junction infrastructure such as handholes and small splice vaults (flowerpots) would be installed intermittently along the fiber route to support network operations. The spacing of these features would vary depending on local service needs, anticipated subscribers, and route configuration, and may range from short intervals in developed areas to approximately two to three miles in longer rural stretches. Typical handholes measure approximately 24 inches by 36 inches by 24 inches, while flowerpot-style splice vaults measure approximately 10 inches by 17 inches. Installation would involve excavation slightly larger than the structure footprint, placement of bedding material (approximately six inches of gravel for handholes and three inches for flowerpots), placement of the structure, and backfilling to match existing grade.

ANALYSIS OF ALTERNATIVES

The recipient’s 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.

NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE

The ‘No Action’ Alternative, which must be assessed in accordance with Federal NEPA regulations, assumes no federal NTIA funding is provided by the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Grant Program (TBCP) for the construction of the proposed broadband fiber infrastructure. The existing communications infrastructure in areas surrounding the proposed action will continue to operate in their current capacity with no changes to communications capabilities for the surrounding communities and will provide no relief to the unserved or underserved rural communities.

Benefits of the no action alternative will include avoiding any potential impacts to the Project site location as a result of construction activities for the new telecommunications infrastructure (such as the generation of emissions of particulate matter, noise, and solid waste or impacts to any cultural resources) as well as any potential impacts to aesthetics in the area surrounding the Project site. The No Action Alternative would not meet the purpose and need because failure to construct the Project would preclude the expansion of high-speed internet access to unserved and underserved communities within the Fort Belknap Reservation and the increased community connectivity need for services such as telehealth, distance learning, public safety, and economic development.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT ELIMINATED FROM FURTHER DISCUSSION

The Proposed Action was identified as the only alternative that would meet the purpose and need because it is the only alternative that provides reliable, high-speed broadband access to the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation community.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The recipient's 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, 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	Less than Significant Impacts	No Impact
Air Quality	Less than Significant Impacts with BMPs and Protective Measures Incorporated	No Impact
Geology and Soils	Less than Significant Impacts	No Impact
Water Resources	Less than Significant Impacts with BMPs and Protective Measures Incorporated	No Impact
Biological Resources	Less than Significant Impacts with BMPs and Protective Measures Incorporated	No Impact
Historical and Cultural Resources	No Impact with BMPs and Protective Measures Incorporated	Less than significant
Tribal Sacred and Religious Sites	No Impact with BMPs and Protective Measures Incorporated	Less than significant
Aesthetic and Visual Resources	No Impact	No Impact
Land Use	Less than Significant Impacts	No Impact
Infrastructure	Less than Significant Impacts	No Impact
Socioeconomic Resources	Beneficial Impact	Negative Impact
Human Health and Safety	No Impact	Negative Impact

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

NOISE

The Project will have short-term increases in ambient noise levels during the construction period. Noise created by machinery used during installation will be temporary and localized in nature. The Project will have no long-term increases in noise levels post-construction, and no significant impacts on noise are expected to occur as a result of Project implementation.

AIR QUALITY

The Project will result in a temporary, localized increase in air emissions during construction due to equipment operation and ground disturbing activities. In order to minimize the generation of fugitive dust emissions as a result of ground disturbance, BMPs (e.g., wetting and stabilizing exposed soils, minimizing exposed soils, and minimizing traffic across unpaved areas) will be implemented. The Project will have no stationary emission sources and will not result in long-term operational emissions. The Project is exempt from all Project-level conformity requirements; however, the Project will comply with all state and local air quality regulations. Due to the limited Project scope and utilization of standard BMPs for air quality, there will be no significant impacts on air quality.

GEOLOGY AND SOILS

The Project will result in ground disturbing activities primarily within existing transportation and utility ROWs. There are no unusual geologic features, known occurrences of important minerals, or known sensitive geologic features present within the Project area. The Project will not occur within soils designated as prime or unique farmlands or farmlands of statewide or local importance. The potential for soil erosion will be addressed through the implementation of erosion and sediment control BMPs. Based on the small scale of soil disturbance that will be required for the proposed action and the use of BMPs, there will be no significant impacts on soil and geologic conditions.

WATER RESOURCES

The Project is located near wetlands and surface waters and is not located within a sole source aquifer area or within a Special Flood Hazard Area of the 100-year floodplain. The anticipated regional groundwater levels at the Project site will be well beneath the extent of any excavation activities. No water withdrawals are proposed as part of Project activities. Where applicable, erosion control BMPs will be implemented, such as silt fencing or wattles, will be used. Low-impact construction techniques and limited ground disturbance are expected to minimize the effects to water resources. Construction would also be limited to the existing ROW or immediately adjacent to the existing ROW and would avoid direct disturbance to wetlands. The Project would have minor and temporary effects on water quality with the implementation of BMP (including wetlands and other waters, water quality, hydrology, or floodplains).

BIOLOGICAL RESOURCES

An Official Species List generated from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) tool and was reviewed for federally listed and proposed threatened and endangered species that may be present at the Project area. The IPaC list identified two protected species, two proposed species, and one experimental population as potentially occurring in the Project vicinity. No critical habitats were identified within the Project site. For the species identified by the IPaC tool, the black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) - experimental population, non-essential, and the monarch butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) - proposed threatened, there may be potential habitat within the Project footprint. The USFWS IPaC tool also identifies migratory bird species of concern that may occur within the Project region including bald and golden eagles and seasonal nesting windows.

The proposed action would occur entirely within previously disturbed areas including existing road and utility ROWs. No tree clearing, vegetation removal, or new vertical structures are proposed for the Project. The Grantee committed to adjust construction activities within existing maintained roadway or utility ROW to avoid prairie dog mounds (potential black-footed ferret habitat) and milkweed (potential monarch butterfly habitat) should they be identified. Since the Grantee

committed to adherence of avoidance of potential habitats, the proposed action would have no effect on federally listed or proposed species under the Endangered Species Act.

The USFWS IPaC also lists migratory birds and eagle species that may be protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) and Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (BGEPA). The Grantee committed to adjust the construction activities, including avoidance buffers and seasonal timing restrictions, should an active raptor nest be identified. The Project is not expected to adversely affect migratory birds or bald and golden eagles.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

In coordination with the Fort Belknap Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) and in recognition of tribal sovereignty, consultation for this Project is being conducted directly with the THPO rather than under the Amended Program Comment (APC). On April 30, 2025, the THPO issued its cultural resources clearance letter for the Project, in which the THPO identified areas within the area of potential effects that were considered to have a high potential for producing cultural resources.

The THPO requires cultural monitoring during all ground-disturbing activities. THPO-qualified monitors will be notified at least one week in advance of planned work locations so that they can remain ahead of field activities. Qualified monitors will be present, and any resources encountered will be avoided and managed in accordance with tribal procedures and applicable federal requirements.

Beyond this requirement, the THPO does not require any additional cultural resources field survey investigations. Provided monitoring requirements are implemented, the THPO's determination indicates that no adverse effects to historic properties are anticipated. As a result, effects on historic properties are expected to be less than significant.

If unanticipated cultural resources and/or human remains are discovered during construction:

- Work would stop immediately in the vicinity of the find.
- The Contractor would notify the THPO.
- Treatment of the discovery would proceed in accordance with 36 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) § 800.13(b) and the FBIC's cultural resource protection protocols.

TRIBAL SACRED AND RELIGIOUS SITES

No known sacred or religious sites are anticipated to be affected by the Proposed Action. As stated above, the THPO's cultural resources clearance letter dated April 30, 2025, requires that a qualified monitor be present during ground-disturbing activities. The requirement reflects the cultural significance of the Proposed Action area and aims to protect any previously unidentified sacred and religious sites that may be identified during construction. In addition, the procedures described

above for managing unanticipated discoveries during construction will further ensure that any effects on tribal sacred and religious sites would be less than significant.

AESTHETIC VISUAL RESOURCES

The proposed action will include the installation of 154 miles of buried fiber optic line, and changes to the viewshed would be short-term and limited to the construction phase with no permanent visual change once the fiber line is installed, thus no adverse impacts to aesthetic and visual resources are anticipated.

LAND USE

The Project will be constructed entirely in previously disturbed areas and removal of mature trees is not expected. This will result in no changes to surrounding property land uses. Therefore, the Project will have no significant impact on land use.

THE BIA FEDERAL ACTION REQUIRED IS FOR APPROVAL OF THE PROPOSED ROW GRANT. APPROXIMATELY 55 MILES OF FIBER WOULD BE INSTALLED WITHIN FORT BELKNAP INDIAN COMMUNITY LANDS REQUIRING A BIA ROW AUTHORIZATION INFRASTRUCTURE

The Project will not adversely affect access to or the function of existing surface transportation routes, airports, railroads, aerial utilities, buried utilities, or utility towers. Construction activities will be temporary and of short duration. The Project is located within existing transportation and utility ROWs along U.S. Highway 2, Montana Highway 66, Lodge Pole Road (Route 11), and Indian Highway 8. Roads will be crossed via bore, with no surface impact to the road. Temporary lane closures or localized traffic disruption may occur but would be short-term and managed through coordination with local agencies and implementation of traffic-control BMPs.

During the operation of the network, ground disturbance during routine maintenance will typically be minor if it occurred at all and will not adversely affect surface transportation routes, airports, railroads, aerial utilities, buried utilities, or utility towers. Therefore, the effects of the Project on existing infrastructure will be less than significant.

Under the No Action Alternative, no construction, operation, or maintenance activities would occur; therefore, there would be no impact on existing infrastructure.

SOCIOECONOMIC RESOURCES

Because the Project will be located within existing ROWs, the Project will result in negligible adverse changes to economic conditions, including property values and/or rental fees, jobs and unemployment rates, and population changes. Any adverse effects will be locationally isolated and limited in duration. The Project may also result in direct and indirect beneficial effects associated with increased access to broadband services.

The No Action Alternative would result in adverse effects on infrastructure and socioeconomics because existing deficiencies in essential infrastructure would continue and the socioeconomic benefits identified above would not be realized.

HEALTH AND HUMAN SAFETY

The Grantee identified closed leaking underground storage tanks, brownfield assessment sites, historical landfill sites and abandoned gravel pits within 1 mile of the Project; however no known contaminated properties or abandoned mine features were identified within the temporary ground disturbance corridor. The Grantee committed to not excavating within any known contaminated properties. Should any stained soil, odors, debris, drums, or other indicators of contamination be encountered during construction, the Grantee committed that work would stop, and the Fort Belknap Tribal Environmental Office would be contacted.

Overall, the Project will result in no adverse impacts on human health and safety and will enhance capabilities and reliability of voice and data communications, which will be beneficial to human health by providing additional economic and educational opportunities and improved access to telehealth care services for Fort Belknap residents.

REASONABLY FORSEEABLE EFFECTS

The Proposed Action is comprised of approximately 154 miles of broadband fiber following existing utility routes, with the fiber placed 3 feet away from existing infrastructure within its own newly proposed ROW. Below-ground junction infrastructure such as handholes and small splice vaults (flowerpots) would be installed intermittently along the fiber route to support network operations. This network would traverse primarily rural prairie and foothill terrain with localized rocky soils, multiple road types, and several stream crossings. The fiber optic line would eventually extend from Highway 2 south along Highway 66 to the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, passing through the towns of Hays and Lodge Pole.

Any impacts to the environment from the Proposed Action and associated actions, when combined with other present, and foreseeable future actions, would be minimal. Further, the minimal negative impacts to the environment from the Proposed Action and associated actions, would be greatly outweighed by the benefit to quality of life for the populations surrounding the proposed

Project areas. In summary, there are therefore no reasonably foreseeable effects that would result from the Proposed Action.

PUBLIC COMMENT

NTIA and BIA conducted a public comment period for the EA. The public notice was posted on the FBIC Tribal website. The notice of the proposal and EA were 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 April 30, 2026, and concluded on May 29, 2026. No comments were received.

DECISION

NTIA and BIA conclude 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 not a major federal action that will significantly affect the quality of the human environment. NTIA and BIA have determined that preparation of an EIS is not required.

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**AMANDA
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Amanda Pereira

Environmental Program Officer
Office of Internet Connectivity and Growth (OICG)
National Telecommunications and Information Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce Room 4874
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20230



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The FONSI was completed in accordance with the Executive Order 14154, Unleashing American Energy (Jan. 20, 2025), and Presidential Memorandum, Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity (Jan. 21, 2025), require the Department to strictly adhere to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 U.S.C. §§ 4321 et seq. Further, such Order and Memorandum repeal Executive Orders 12898 (Feb. 11, 1994) and 14096 (Apr. 21, 2023). Because Executive Orders 12898 and 14096 have been repealed, complying with such Orders is a legal impossibility.

The Environmental Assessment (EA) has been prepared to meet the requirements of the Department of the Interior (DOI) NEPA procedures, including the 2025 DOI NEPA Handbook and appendices, which provide the framework for evaluating environmental effects, determining significance, and meeting statutory timelines.

The BIA must meet its responsibility to review and approve actions on Tribal lands held in trust for the benefit of the Tribe. The BIA and Tribe determine if a proposed project might significantly impact Tribal and adjacent lands. The federal action required is for BIA approval of the proposed ROW grant. Approximately 55 miles of fiber would be installed within Fort Belknap Indian Community lands requiring a BIA ROW authorization.

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Mark Azure

Superintendent
Bureau of Indian Affairs
Fort Belknap Agency
158 Tribal Way, Suite B
Harlem, MT 59526

