



December 7, 2023

Rebecca Tepper, Secretary
Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs
Attn: Purvi Patel
100 Cambridge Street, Suite 900
Boston, MA 02114

Re: NSTAR Transmission Right-of Way Reliability Project, EEA# 16567

Dear Secretary Tepper:

The Berkshire Regional Planning Commission (BRPC) hereby submits comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) for NSTAR Transmission Right-of Way Reliability Project (EEA# 16567). The Transmission Right-of-way Reliability Program (TRRP) is a long-term transmission system reliability and resiliency program that increases the maintained width of the WT-02 ROW to the easement edge. The intent of the program is to improve system reliability by reducing the number of tree fall-in risks and to create a sustainable environment comprised of vegetation that can safely coexist with the transmission lines. The long-term management objective of the TRRP is to manage these newly cleared areas as early succession habitat and encourage the growth of grasses, forbs, and shrubs. The proposed project spans five municipalities in Massachusetts: Hancock, Lanesborough, Cheshire, Dalton and Hinsdale. However, it is important to note that, in addition to the WT-02 ROW, the Program-Wide Western Massachusetts TRRP includes 6 additional ROW's between 2023 and 2027 and another 11 ROW's with a timeline to be determined.

The project will result in extensive impacts. Tree removal within the WT-02 ROW will permanently convert 122.7 acres of forested land to successional scrub-shrub habitat; this includes 14.4 acres of bordering vegetated wetlands (BVW) and 11.0 acres of other wetland resource areas (i.e., isolated vegetated wetlands [IVW], bordering land subject to flooding [BLSF], and riverfront area [RFA]). Further, the placement of construction mats to support equipment through wetlands during tree removal activities will temporarily impact 5.9 acres of BVW and 2.2 acres of other wetland resource areas.

The WT-02 ROW TRRP will permanently convert 7.0 acres of state-listed rare species designated Priority Habitat from forested land to successional scrub-shrub habitat as a result of tree clearing. Temporary impacts to 1.0 acre of Priority Habitat will result from the placement of construction mats; however, because NHESP has determined that the activity (with conditions) will not result in a "Take" of a listed species the MEPA threshold for rare species is not triggered.

The following comments are intended for incorporation into the Final EIR to provide greater clarity and/or improve the planning and design of the Project.

1. BRPC understands that vegetation greater than 15 feet-30 feet is considered incompatible within the Wire Zone and Border Zone. BRPC further understands that expanding the existing, maintained (cleared) width of the ROW will involve removing those non-compatible trees and shrubs, leaving the remaining low growing shrub cover. It is stated with the DEIR that upon removal of construction mats areas will be allowed to revegetate and no shrub plantings are proposed because access for watering is difficult in these remote areas and survivability is expected to be low.

Mitigation measures for upland areas are described with the DEIR and include seeding, covering with a layer of straw mulch, and erosion controls. The Final EIR should include greater detail with regard to how the areas will be stabilized and ensure that they are successfully converted to scrub-shrub habitat providing the habitat that would be expected.

2. BRPC previously commented requesting clarification of how the newly cleared areas will be managed as early succession habitat, including how the growth of grasses, forbs, and shrubs will be encouraged. The response in the DEIR stated that Eversource will continue to manage its maintained ROW per its integrated vegetation management plan which aims to enhance suitable habitat for compatible low-growing species.

The Final EIR should include, at a minimum, a summary of the measures that will be taken as part of this project rather than referring to a regular maintenance plan.

3. The Final EIR should specifically address mitigation in the form of culvert and stream enhancements, which was requested within the Secretary's Certificate. The DEIR is deficient with regard to both culverts and stream enhancements and should to be addressed in the Final EIR.
4. As requested by the MEPA Office, the DEIR includes a list of each ROW segment managed by Eversource in Western Massachusetts, along with a conceptual, quantitative overview of impacts from the program in its entirety. The TRRP Western Massachusetts Program-Wide cumulative impacts include an estimated 260.7 total acres of tree removal within the 200-ft Riverfront Area. Tree removal within the WT-02 ROW totals 7.1 acres.

5. Measures proposed within the Final DEIR to avoid, minimize, and mitigate potential adverse impacts to surface waters include maintaining existing low-growing, compatible vegetation in place on stream banks to the extent practicable and land preservation.

Tree removal on riverbanks would be expected to result in increased water temperatures and alterations to habitat, at a minimum. The Final EIR should address measures to minimize impacts to riverbank and proposed mitigation measures that specifically address the impacts resulting from the project.

5. BRPC previously commented requesting clarification regarding what methods will be used to minimize the potential for the introduction of invasive species and control potential invasive species. BRPC understands that Eversource's lawful ability to manage site conditions is limited to the boundaries of legal easements.

Invasive species management techniques are listed in the DEIR but are limited to the period of time while tree work is in progress. The Final EIR should clarify that these techniques, when applicable, will be utilized once tree work is completed. The Final EIR should address whether there will be a greater likelihood that invasive species will spread as a result of this project. If this project is expected to result in the expansion of existing invasive species the Final EIR should include potential mitigation measures (including financial measures).

6. BRPC understands that no work will occur within Priority Habitat for the wood turtle during the turtle active season, between April 15 – October 31 of any year, unless otherwise approved by NHESP. BRPC further understands that if any work is proposed during the turtle active season, a Turtle Protection Plan must be submitted for review and written approval by NHESP.

BRPC remains concerned regarding potential impacts to wood turtle habitat and nesting sites. The Final EIR should provide an additional explanation regarding the impacts to wood turtle habitat that will occur regardless of the time of year that the work will be conducted. The Final EIR should provide information regarding the minimization and mitigation of impacts to habitat AND the resulting impacts to wood turtles.

The BRPC Executive Committee endorsed these comments at their meeting on December 7, 2023.

Sincerely,



Thomas Matuszko, AICP
Executive Director