

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

**Amelia Solar II Project
Amelia County, Virginia**

**RURAL UTILITIES SERVICE
U.S. Department of Agriculture**

Holocene Clean Energy

**Prepared by:
Engineering and Environmental Staff
Rural Utilities Service**

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A. INTRODUCTION

Holocene Clean Energy has submitted a financing request to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Rural Utilities Service (RUS) to construct the proposed Amelia Solar II Project in Amelia Court House, Amelia County, Virginia (VA). Holocene proposes to lease 41.3 acres of a larger 189-acre parcel for the construction of a 5 megawatt (MW) solar facility to provide a source of long-term renewable energy for rural Virginia residents. The project area has recently been timbered and contains a transmission line alongside a gravel road. Land use in the vicinity includes agricultural lands, forestland, and scattered residences.

RUS may consider approving this financing request. Prior to taking a federal action (e.g., providing financial assistance), RUS is required to complete an environmental effects analysis in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) (U.S.C. 4231 et seq.), the Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) regulations for implementing NEPA (40 CFR Parts 1500-1508), and RUS's NEPA implementing regulations, Environmental Policies and Procedures (7 CFR Part 1970). RUS is required to prepare an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the proposed Project.

After completing an independent analysis of a report prepared by Holocene Clean Energy, RUS concurred with its scope and content. In accordance with 7 CFR § 1970.102(6), RUS adopted the report and issued it as the agency's EA for the proposed Project. RUS finds that the EA is consistent with federal regulations and meets the standards for an adequate EA. Holocene published two newspaper notices in a weekly periodical, announcing the availability of the EA for public review, in accordance with 7 CFR §1970.102(6)(ii).

B. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Holocene Clean Energy is proposing to construct a 41.3-acre solar facility on a leased portion of a larger 189-acre property located on Giles Road near the intersection of Giles Road and South Giles Road, in the town of Amelia Court House, Amelia County, VA. The solar panel array will generate approximately 5 MW of alternating current (MWac) of clean, reliable solar energy. Project components include the installation of photovoltaic panel arrays ground-mounted on single-axis tracking solar racking equipment with a maximum height of 15 feet from the ground surface. The steel racking system will be anchored into the ground using driven steel piers. An interior road will be constructed inside the proposed Project perimeter and a security fence with gates will be installed to secure the facility. The estimated duration of construction is 4 months and it is anticipated that the proposed Project will operate for a minimum of 35 years. The area can be returned to its pre-construction state once the proposed Project has reached the end of its useful life.

The proposed Project will interconnect to Southside Electric Cooperative (SEC) electrical distribution system located offsite. SEC has existing three-phase infrastructure on the parcel directly south of the project area. SEC will install three-phase infrastructure in an underground utility easement along the eastern boundary of the project area. The underground electric utility easement will travel into the adjoining southern parcel and span approximately 5,000 feet. SEC would construct all necessary distribution system upgrades to interconnect the facility to their electrical system at a delivery point.

C. PURPOSE/NEED

1. Agency Purpose and Need

USDA, RUS is authorized to make loans and loan guarantees to finance the construction of electric distribution, transmission, and generation facilities, including system improvements and replacements required to furnish and improve electric service to rural areas, as well as demand side management, energy conservation programs, and on-grid and off-grid renewable energy systems. The Rural Electrification Act of 1936, as amended (7 USC §901 et seq.), generally authorizes the Secretary of Agriculture to make rural electrification and telecommunication loans, including specifying eligible borrowers, references, purposes, terms and conditions, and security requirements.

2. Applicant Purpose and Need

The Commonwealth of Virginia has recently established renewable energy goals across the state and those goals can only be met through cooperation with private projects. Holocene Clean Energy, Raleigh, North Carolina, has therefore partnered with the local utility provider, SEC, to construct the proposed Project and allow its future interconnection to the utility grid. The proposed Project will provide long-term, emission free electricity, help limit greenhouse gas emissions through the generation of solar energy while also providing reliable power to customers in Amelia County at competitive rates.

D. ALTERNATIVES EVALUATED

1. No Action

The No Action Alternative is not responsive to the needs of the Applicant in fulfilling the demands of its customers for affordable and reliable solar energy. Furthermore, the opportunity to reduce consumer consumption of non-renewable energy will be forgone and the environmental benefit of this shift in energy supply unrealized. The No Action Alternative would not provide benefits to the human environment or provide a clean renewable energy alternative to other energy sources.

2. Proposed Action

The proposed Action involves the construction of a 41.3-acre solar farm on a portion of a larger 198.9-acre property located on Giles Road near the intersection of Giles Road and South Giles Road, in the town of Amelia Court House, Amelia County, VA. The proposed Project will also include the construction of an inverter and control unit, a perimeter fence to enclose the arrays, vegetative buffers/screening, and necessary stormwater BMPs. The proposed Project site was selected based on proximity to an existing infrastructure with capacity to receive power generated by the proposed Project and that also required minimal grading. The proposed Project will require minimal tree clearing with no impacts to wetlands or streams.

E. SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

The analyses in the EA documented that the proposed Project would have no adverse effects to land use and important farmland soils. A summary of anticipated effects on the human environment is provided below.

Cultural Resources and Historic Properties. Holocene and their consultant, True North Consultants (True North), conducted a review of the VA Department of Historic Resources (DHR) VA Cultural Resource Information System (VCRIS) and did not identify any cultural resources. One architectural resource and one archeological resource adjacent to the proposed Project area were identified. After review of the proposed Project and submitted findings, the VA Department of Historic Resources concurred with a finding of No Historic Properties Affected by the Project in an email dated July 14, 2020.

True North coordinated with federally recognized tribes by letter dated June 12, 2020 to the Delaware Nation and the Nansemond Indian Nation. An email response from the Nansemond Indian Nation dated June 17, 2020 offered no objection to the proposed Project but requested to be informed if ancestral or cultural artifacts were discovered. The Delaware Nation provided a response on June 29, 2020, stating that the proposed Project does not endanger cultural, or religious sites of interest of the Delaware Nation. They too requested notification should an archaeological site or artifacts be inadvertently uncovered.

Threatened and Endangered Species. Pursuant to Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, True North conducted a review of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Information, Planning and Consultation (IPaC) database to evaluate the potential for federally listed endangered and threatened species and their habitat in the Project area. According to the IPaC database, one federally listed species, the Northern long-eared bat (NLEB), is listed as having the potential to occur in the proposed Project area however, the area lacks the presence of critical habitat. In a letter dated April 9, 2021 the USFWS stated that the Action is consistent with activities analyzed in the USFWS's January 5, 2016 Programmatic Biological Opinion and that the Action may affect the NLEB, however, any take that may occur as a result

of the Action is not prohibited under the ESA Section 4(d) rule adopted for this species. True North obtained an updated species list from the USFWS IPaC on April 12, 2021, that identified the same result, the potential presence of the NLEB. A time of year restriction will be implemented to prohibit tree removal during the NLEB pup season from June 1 through July 31, and the active season from April 15 through September 15.

Floodplains. According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM) Number 51007C0075C, the Project is located outside the Special Hazard Area (SFHA) and 100 year or 500 year floodplain zones.

Wetlands. A Preliminary Jurisdictional Determination from the USACE in March of 2020. The USACE responded in a letter dated May 8, 2020 confirming the delineations outlined in Wetland Delineation Report. This determination concluded that there are 1.93 acres of wetlands and 4,422 linear feet of waters located within the parent parcel.

Executive Order 11990 requires federal agencies to take action to minimize the destruction, loss, or degradation of wetlands and to provide opportunity for early public review for any proposals for new construction in wetlands. To meet these requirements, the Eight-Step Decision Making Process for Alternative Consideration was utilized to determine that there is no practicable alternative to wetland impacts and measures will be implemented to minimize harm to wetlands. Impacts to the wetlands will be avoided with the implementation of a Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP) and stormwater management features.

F. PUBLIC AND AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

Local newspaper notices, announcing the availability of the EA, were published on April 29 – May 6, 2021, in The Amelia Bulletin Monitor (Amelia County, Virginia). A copy of the EA was available for public review at the James L. Hamner Public Library, 16351 Dunn Street, Amelia Court House, VA 23002. The 14-day comment period ended on May 13, 2021. RUS received no comments.

G. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on its EA, RUS has concluded that the proposed Project would have no significant impacts to the human environment. RUS has concluded that the proposed Project would have no adverse effects to federally listed threatened and endangered species, candidate species, or federally designated critical habitat. The proposed Project would not disproportionately affect minority or low-income populations. No historic properties would be affected by the proposed Project.

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act, as amended (42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq.), the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations (40 CFR 1500–1508), and RUS's Environmental Policies and Procedures (7 CFR Part 1970), RUS has determined that the environmental effects of the proposed Project have been adequately addressed and that no significant impacts to the quality of the human environment would result from construction and operation of the proposed Project. Any final action by RUS related to the proposed Project will be subject to, and contingent upon, compliance with all relevant federal and state environmental laws and regulations. Because RUS's action will not result in significant impacts to the quality of the human environment, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared for the proposed Project.

H. RUS LOAN REVIEW AND RIGHT OF ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW

This FONSI is not a decision on a loan application and therefore not an approval of the expenditure of federal funds. Issuance of the FONSI and its notices concludes RUS's environmental review process in accordance with NEPA and RUS's Environmental Policies and Procedures (7 CFR Part 1970). The ultimate decision as to loan approval depends upon conclusion of this environmental review process in addition to financial and engineering reviews. Issuance of the FONSI and publication of notices will allow for these reviews to proceed. The decision to provide financial assistance is also subject to the availability of loan funds for the designated purpose in RUS's budget. There are no provisions to appeal this decision (i.e., issuance of a FONSI). Legal challenges to the FONSI may be filed in federal district court under the Administrative Procedures Act.

I. APPROVAL

This Finding of No Significant Impact is effective on signature.

Dated:

CHRISTOPHER McLEAN
Assistant Administrator
Electric Programs
Rural Utilities Service

Contact Person

Finding of No Significant Impact
Amelia Solar II Project

For additional information on this FONSI and EA, please contact Ms. Suzanne Kopich, Environmental Protection Specialist, Water and Environmental Programs, USDA Rural Utilities Service, at 202-692-4907; or e-mail: suzanne.kopich@usda.gov.