Proposed Project Description Summary

The proposed action consists of maintenance activities typical of electrical industry practices for maintaining right-of-way (ROW), access, structures and other equipment along approximately 280 miles of existing transmission lines located on National Forest System (NFS) lands. Part of the proposal is to change the approach to vegetation management. In response to North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC) requirements and changing industry practices, Western proposes to modify its overall approach to vegetation management. The new approach involves evaluating existing vegetation conditions on the ROW, defining actions needed to manage vegetation and then implementing the actions and monitoring the ROW. Implementation would include a variety of vegetation management activities designed to reduce or eliminate threats to facilities, mitigate ROW fuel load conditions, and meet other objectives listed below. In general, trees that grow to heights that may present a safety hazard are considered incompatible. These species would be targeted for management. About 237 miles of transmission line ROW are proposed for initial treatment to meet these objectives. Western's proposal includes a long term approach that will involve monitoring and re-treatment of these and other areas at appropriate intervals based on the re-growth rates for incompatible species. Forest Service authorizations for Western's transmision lines on NFS lands would need to be modified to accommodate this proposal.

Several objectives would be met by the proposed action;

- Ensure sufficient access to the facilities for maintenance.
- Ensure that Western's transmission facilities can be maintained to ensure that they are operational for the useful life of the facility.
- Protect public and worker safety by ensuring safe conditions on the ROW and well maintained facilities.
- Manage vegetation more effectively to ensure the reliable operation of the power system.
- Comply with current industry practices and mandatory reliability standards and maintain flexibitiliy to accommodate future changes in requirements.
- Reduce the risk and duration of power flow interruptions caused by wildfire events, and enhance the overall fire survivability of Western's facilities. This includes managing ROW fuel loads.
- Increase management flexibility to address a variety of conditions and risks while effectively meeting other natural resource protection objectives such as minimizing visual impacts; protecting sensitive areas; minimizeing effects on special status species and habitats, controling noxious weeds; protecting cultural resources; and others.
- Minimize risks of power interruptions, fire starts and damage to the tranmsmission lines from vegetation growing into or too close to conductors (wires).

- Minimize the risks of power interruptions, fire starts and damage to the transmission lines from vegetation falling into structures and conductors.

- Maximize cost containment and improve maintenance efficiency. This may be done by balancing the frequency and intensity of vegetation treatment on the ROW in the short term and over the long term by choosing control methods based on effectiveness, enviromental effects, site characteristics, safety, security and economics.

The ROWs cross through a variety of vegetation communities at elevations ranging from approximately 6,000 feet to 11,000 feet. The widths of the transmission line ROW vary based on the voltage of the line and typically range from 75 feet to 175 feet. Western and the Forest Service will evaluate impacts on a variety of environmental resources that may occur along the approximately 4,000 total acres of right-of-way. Design criteria will be developed to minimize these impacts.

Some vegetative communities pose more risk to transmission lines than others and treatment proposals would be based on the characteristics of each community. Vegetation treatment methods and future treatment intervals would vary on a ROW depending on the vegetation type, vegetative regrowth, environmental protection requirements, and risks to the transmission line. For example, in ROW areas with relatively low conductor to ground clearances, the proposal would typically include managing for lower growth plant species through more frequent reentries and selectively reducing or eliminating species that at mature height would threaten the reliability of the transmission line. Species that would be promoted would generally be grasses, forbs, shrubs, and occasional small or low growth tree species. In ROW areas where there is generally sufficient conductor to ground clearance even with mature trees, vegetation management actions would be less intensive. For example in areas of extremes in terrain, such as in drainages and canyons spanned by the line, mature trees may not pose significant risks to the transmission lines. However, the same tree species may pose unacceptable risks on the crests of the adjacent slopes where these trees could grow into or fall into the structures or conductors.

The vegetation management proposal includes an initial pass through areas that have been identified as requiring immediate treatment. The initial pass will affect approximately 237 miles of the approximately 278 miles of transmission line ROW on NFS lands. These areas are proposed for mechanical treatment, to remove tall growth species in forested areas, and address a build up of fuels resulting from several decades of previous vegetation management activities, in which trees were cut and left. Treatments may include logging, chipping, and grinding of trees and existing debris using mechanized equipment, and other activities developed in concert with the Forest Service and public involvement. Longer term vegetation management activities would shift to lower intensity treatments that encourage the recruitment, retention, and stabilization of more compatible plant communities.