

The Western Regional Corridor Study: An Overview

by Carl Barnett and Michael G. Clayton

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Michael G. Clayton is the principal consultant for the 1990 Western Regional Corridor Study—a position he held for the 1986 study as well. He has academic degrees in biology and environmental management, and 17 years experience as a consultant in energy and linear facilities planning. His company, Michael Clayton & Associates, provides planning and environmental consulting services.

Until now, we have had limited data available to incorporate utility corridor considerations into our planning process. This study will provide new information as we revise and amend plans to meet a broad spectrum of public needs.

Cy Jamison, director of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and F. Dale Robertson, chief of the U.S. Forest Service—May 1991.

INTRODUCTION

From Topaz Lake on the California-Nevada state line south to Owens Valley lake bed you can find some notably varied terrain. This diverse landscape comprises high desert range, rugged escarpments, glacial valleys and alpine forests, meadows and lakes. In 1990, this area became the object of a cooperative utility corridor study by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the U.S. Forest Service (Forest Service).

The purpose of the Western Regional Corridor Study (WRCS) is to assess the opportunities for east-west utility corridors between Nevada and Southern California. It was the first such joint-agency utility corridor study, and included the assistance of local utility companies and public participation.

The study has proceeded as planned; the results, however, have been unexpected. When viewed in the context of the California Desert Plan that guides the management of the southern portion of this region, there

are only two possible east-west corridors along the Nevada-California border between Topaz Lake and Interstate 15 (a 310-mile distance).

All other potential routes have been excluded because of federal legislation, restrictive land use regulations, extreme topography and the presence of single-purpose public lands (wilderness areas, wilderness study areas, national parks, national conservation areas and national recreation areas). The study results suggest what the utilities industry has cautioned for several years: utility corridors are diminishing resources that need to be considered in federal land use planning.

The corridor study illustrates a situation that is becoming common throughout the West. It underscores the need for cooperative efforts between federal land management agencies and the electric utility, pipeline and telecommunications industries toward effective regional corridor planning. The updated study represents this type of broad-based effort.

This article provides an overview of the corridor study from its beginnings in the mid-1970s to the updated report due to be completed in June of 1992. Three more articles on the corridor study will appear in future issues of *Right of Way*:

- "A History of the Western Regional Corridor Study," will recount the regulatory events leading up to the 1980 and 1986 editions of the corridor study. The results of those two reports will be highlighted.
- "The 1990 Western Regional Corridor Study Process," will describe the comprehensive and cooperative efforts that are currently underway to prepare the 1992 report.
- "Key Findings of the 1990 Western Regional Corridor Study," will address the results of the updated study, the anticipated followup activities within industry and federal land planning agencies, and a proposal to maintain a current corridor study.

BACKGROUND

Beginning in the mid-1970s, the utilities industry, federal land management agencies and conservation organizations recognized a growing need to establish a regional utility corridor system for the western United States. The goal of this system would be to accommodate growth in energy transmission and communication facilities in a way that would minimize the increase of separate linear rights of way and associated environmental impacts. The need for a corridor system was deemed sufficiently important to include a section specifically addressing corridor designation (Section 503) in the Federal Land Management Policy Act of 1976.

Responding to the need for a regional corridor system, the Western

Utility Group (WUG), in cooperation with 100 linear right-of-way users, published the 1980 Western Regional Corridor Study. Its purpose was to provide federal land managers with information relevant to the consideration of future utility corridors in federal land use plans. The 1980 study also identified necessary utility corridors for each of the 11 western states.

In 1986, WUG published an update to the 1980 study. This update focused on the continued need for a regional approach to utility corridor planning. Specifically, the 1986 study highlighted the status of corridor designation in federal land management plans and provided updated state maps of industry-identified corridors. Since 1986, many utility

corridor planners have used the study as a resource, and both the BLM and the Forest Service have used the 1986 update as a basis for several corridor planning projects.

NEED FOR A NEW UPDATE

A number of factors have emphasized the need for an updated corridor study by 1992:

- An update will provide more comprehensive state-by-state maps, reflecting the industry's corridor needs and showing corridor constraint and exclusion areas.
- New technological advances together with an emphasis on

Utility corridors are diminishing resources that need to be considered in federal land use planning

- Drafts of BLM resource management plans and Forest Service land management plans are coming due for review in the western states. An updated WRCS will provide a reference for the review of regional

cooperative use of facilities and corridors will require utilities to reassess their corridor routing needs.

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- Many potential corridors have been lost due to various land use decisions since the 1986 update was published.
- Current and projected corridor needs have been affected by changing demographics and the associated service requirements.
- BLM and Forest Service involvement in the utility corridor planning process has become essential. Complete cooperation between public land managers and the utilities industry will be necessary to meet public energy and communication needs.

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

While the updated study is sponsored by WUG, industry participation to date includes approximately 40 electric and gas utility, pipeline and telecommunications companies (Table 1). BLM and Forest Service regional representatives are also participating through their contribution of resource information and consultation on corridor planning issues.

The comprehensive level of industry participation in the study requires a project coordination structure that includes an industry oversight committee and an industry coordinator for each state (Figure 2, on page 16).

OBJECTIVES

The study is designed to show the industry's existing and future corridor needs and the exclusion areas on federal lands that prohibit the construction, operation, and maintenance of linear utility facilities. More specific objectives of the corridor study are as follows:

- To update WUG's corridor study of 1986 by mapping existing and future corridor needs of the electric and gas utility, pipeline and telecommunication industries for each of the 11 western states.
- To identify and evaluate existing and prospective utility corridors for the potential of additional or

upgraded facilities.

- To develop a reference document to support the identification and evaluation of future corridor needs, and routing studies in relationship to existing and pending federal legislation, regulations and land management policy.
- To provide current information and mapped locational data to assist federal agency planners in addressing corridor planning issues.

STUDY PROCESS AND SCHEDULE

A comprehensive study process has been established for WRCS (Figure 1). The milestones are as follows:

Winter 1990-91. During the past winter, the focus of the corridor study was on startup activities associated with the establishment of the project's oversight and advisory committees. It was necessary to define the roles, responsibilities and methods of project coordination among the industry and agency participants.

Spring 1991. In spring, a questionnaire was prepared and distributed to the participating agencies in order to identify corridor constraint and exclusion information and other information that the agencies believed should be included in the final report. Numerous project orientation meetings were also conducted for BLM state offices and Forest Service regional offices throughout the western states.

Summer 1991. This summer, the study effort has shifted to identifying and mapping industry-needed corridors, completing agency questionnaires, conducting agency workshops to identify corridor constraint and exclusion information, and preparing draft corridor constraint and exclusion maps.

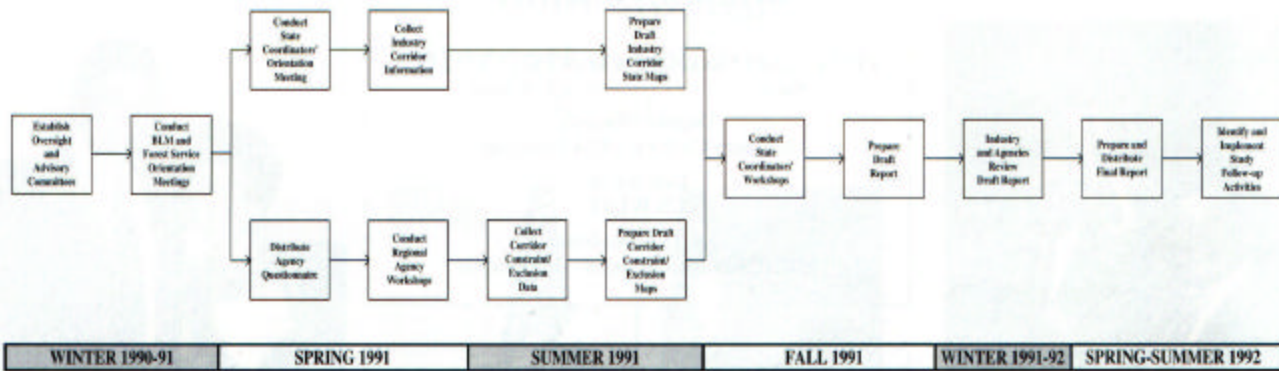
Fall 1991. During the fall, the mapping of corridor constraint and exclusion information will continue, and a series of industry state coordinator

TABLE 1 PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

Western Utility Group
Arizona Public Service Co.
AT&T
Bonneville Power Adm.
Edison Electric Institute
Idaho Power Co.
MCI Telecomm. Corp.
Montana Power Co.
Nevada Power Co.
Northwest Pipeline Co.
Pacific Bell
Pacific Gas & Electric Co.
PacifiCorp
Public Serv. Co. of Colorado
Public Serv. Co. of New Mexico
Puget Sound Power & Light Co.
Salt River Project
San Diego Gas & Electric Co.
Sierra Pacific Power Co.
So. California Gas Co.
So. California Edison Co.
U.S. WEST
Wash. Water Power Co.
Deseret Generation Transm. Co.
El Paso Electric Co.
El Paso Natural Gas Co.
L.A. Dept. of Water & Power
Pacific Gas Transmission Co.
Portland General Electric Co.
Questar Pipeline Co.
Rocky Mountain Nat. Gas Co.
Seattle City Light
Shell Pipeline Co.
Southwest Gas Corporation
Tri-State Generation and Transmission Association
TransAlta Utilities Corporation
Tuscon Electric Power Co.
U.S. Sprint
Western Area Power Adm.

Western Utility Group is an ad hoc organization of electric, pipeline and communication companies based throughout the West.

FIGURE 1 STUDY PROCESS AND SCHEDULE



workshops will be initiated to resolve any outstanding questions regarding the location and type of needed or existing industry corridors. Also, the preparation of the report text and compilation of the draft report will begin.

Winter 1991-92. This coming winter, the draft report will be completed and distributed to the industry and

agency participants for review and comment.

Spring-Summer 1992. During this period, the final report will be prepared and distributed, and the appropriate followup activities will be identified and implemented.

To the extent that the study's 1992 report is integrated into the industry and federal agency land management

process, it may prove to be an informative resource and an effective planning tool.

PROJECT BENEFITS


A number of benefits to federal land planning agencies and the electric and gas utility, pipeline and telecommunications industries can be expected from the updated study (Tables 2 and 3). 

TABLE 2 INDUSTRY BENEFITS

- The updated corridor study will provide the utilities industry with information that expresses the industry's corridor planning needs. The information will aid the industry's effectiveness in dealing with federal land managing agencies and legislators.
- The corridor study will provide an opportunity for the utilities industry to review its existing and future regional corridor needs.
- Areas will be identified that are particularly constrained for the future location of utility corridors as a result of legislative, regulatory, or other actions that affect federal lands.
- The corridor study will facilitate future routing studies, and reduce the risks and costs associated with the siting and permitting of facilities.
- For the first time, a regional context will be developed to facilitate corridor planning by industry, the BLM and the Forest Service. This reference document will show the cumulative effects of federal land use policy on utilities planning and identify areas that are particularly constrained for the location of linear facility corridors. The corridor study will also strengthen the communication and cooperation in land planning between federal land management agencies and industry.

TABLE 3 AGENCY BENEFITS

- A regional context will be developed to facilitate regional corridor planning through the mapping of industry-identified corridor needs and agency-designated corridors in the 11 western states.
- A reference document will be developed illustrating the cumulative effects of land use policy and restrictions on industry corridor planning.
- Interagency and interjurisdictional coordination in regional corridor planning and utilities project review will be facilitated.

FIGURE 2 PROJECT COORDINATION

