

**DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

**Draft Environmental Assessment
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Agriculture Research Services
Proposed Solar Array Project
Henry A. Wallace Beltsville Agricultural Research Center**

I. NAME OF ACTION

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Research Services (ARS) is proposing to provide a portion of BARC to an Independent Power Producer (IPP) for a 20-year term to build and operate a solar photovoltaic system (SPVS) or solar panel array. The Purpose of the Proposed Action is to provide BARC with an on-site cost-efficient renewable energy source that would offset future energy requirements while meeting federal government renewable energy directives in Energy Policy Act (EPAct) 2005 and Energy Security and Independence Act (EISA), as well as associated Executive Order (13834). It would also allow USDA and ARS to support the development of local renewable energy infrastructure, reduce energy costs, and continue to support broader green power initiatives through the purchase of renewable energy certificates (RECs) applied towards annual Agency renewable energy goals.

II. DESCRIPTION OF ACTION

a. Proposed Action:

The Proposed Action has two distinct Federal actions, the award of PPA to an IPP and the recording of a non-exclusive utility easement at sites selected by the IPP from an available pool of sites described as the Proposed Action. USDA-ARS is proposing to select an IPP through an open competition, and then enter into a PPA with that IPP to establish a non-exclusive utility easement for distinct portions of the BARC facility property. The IPP will be responsible for identifying which of the sites from the available pool described as the Proposed Action will be developed, based upon considerations of efficient delivery to the existing electrical grid. Once the specific sites are identified, the IPP would be responsible for building and operating an SPVS or solar panel array. Once installed, the IPP would have a Professional Land Surveyor define the utility easements through a metes and bounds description of the final array and wiring locations. The utility easements would be recorded at Prince George's County, and will be granted by the USDA-ARS for a 20-year term. The IPP would be solely responsible for the cost of planning, development, construction, operation, maintenance, and ultimate dismantling (if applicable) of the SPVS when the lease expires. The PPA would set a price per kilowatt-hour (kWh) for the electricity generated by the SPVS, and the BARC facility would agree to purchase the energy generated from the SPVS to meet the facility's energy demands. The BARC facility would benefit by having a set price for the electricity supplied by the SPVS.

The power generated from the SPVS system would be directly tied to the BARC facility downstream of the existing electrical meters. In addition, the IPP would coordinate with the local utility, the Potomac Electric Power Company (PEPCO), to connect the solar array to the utility grid. The electricity generated by the SPVS would offset a portion of the total electrical needs of the BARC facility for 20 years. When the easement expires, the dismantling and removal of the SPVS will be required or the government could purchase the SPVS at the end of the 20-year term for fair market value. The IPP selection process and the SPVS technical specifications and details will be determined and fully defined through a competitive bidding process scheduled to begin this calendar year.

b. Alternatives:

Alternatives considered included No Action and Site Alternatives being eliminated due to limiting characteristics and other land use constraints removing these locations from further consideration. Findings and conclusions of the No Action Alternative and Site Alternatives eliminated are provided in the Environmental Assessment (EA).

Although the No Action Alternative would avoid potential Proposed Action-related environmental impacts and financial expenditures associated with the Proposed Action, it would not fulfill the Proposed Action's purposes and would not meet current and long-range program for energy efficiency conservation opportunities.

III. ANTICIPATED ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

Potential environmental impact issues related to construction of the solar array panels, use of proposed staging areas, dismantling, and the minimization and mitigation measures that would be employed to address them are described below.

Using the No Action Alternative as the baseline for assessing potential impacts from the Proposed Action, the following potential issues and concerns have been identified:

- Temporary and localized, but not significant, adverse impacts to ground resources are expected in the land disturbance areas, such as soil erosion and sedimentation during construction. These impacts will be further minimized by contractual specifications for the IPP solicitation for appropriate erosion control that will prevent further impact from the drilling activities used to install the solar mounts.
- Temporary adverse, but not significant, impacts to air quality are expected from heavy equipment emissions and increases in fugitive dust and airborne particulates from construction and dismantling related activities.
- Adverse, but not significant, impacts to biological resources (vegetation) are expected as a result of the Proposed Action where shrub or tree clearing is required to facilitate the installation of the solar facilities.
- Temporary impacts, but not significant, to ambient noise are expected from construction and dismantling related activities.

- Adverse but not significant with mitigation, impacts to visual resources are expected as a result of the Proposed Action.
- Utilities services would not be expected to increase significantly as a result of the Proposed Action. After the solar array facilities are fully on-line, they are expected to augment available electricity for the BARC facility and offset the cost of baseload electricity from non-renewable sources.
- Adverse, but not significant, impacts to waste management are expected from construction and dismantling activities.
- Local roadways and parking are adequate to support movement of construction equipment and materials to the project area and there would be a minor and temporary impact to traffic accessing the BARC Facility grounds during the construction and dismantling phases.

Although no significant impacts to the environment are anticipated, the USDA-ARS would ensure the following mitigation measures are implemented to minimize potential impacts. These measures would be implemented through provisions stipulated in design and construction contracts and lease agreements. The potentially adverse environmental impacts related to the construction, operation, and dismantling of the Proposed Action could be minimized, mitigated and controlled to acceptable levels by implementation of the following measures:

- USDA-ARS would require the contractor to use dust abatement measures, such as wetting, mulching, or seeding exposed areas, where appropriate, to address any air quality concerns.
- USDA-ARS would require the contractor to mitigate vehicle emissions impacts as much as possible by prohibiting truck idling.
- USDA-ARS would require the contractor to provide lay down (i.e., temporary material storage) areas for construction equipment and materials within existing cleared and paved areas to minimize disturbance to existing land and vegetation.
- USDA-ARS would require contractor compliance with erosion and sediment control measures related to stabilization of disturbed areas.
- USDA-ARS would require the contractor to provide silt fencing, or other suitable control device, to be placed around the construction area to mitigate erosion and sediment runoff.
- USDA-ARS would require the contractor to implement BMPs for erosion/sediment control and stormwater management to minimize impacts to the existing stormwater collection system, wetlands, and other environmental resources.
- USDA-ARS would require all necessary measures be taken by the contractor to prevent, control, and mitigate the release of oils, trash, debris, and other pollutants to air, water and land.
- USDA-ARS would require contractors to safely handle and dispose of solid and hazardous waste in accordance with applicable local, state and federal regulations.
- USDA-ARS would require contractors to provide appropriate health and safety training, precautions and other protection for their workers.

- USDA-ARS would require contractors to recycle or reuse materials to the greatest extent possible, and to dispose of construction debris in accordance with federal, state and local waste disposal regulations.
- USDA-ARS would require that the Proposed Action not commence without the concurrence of the MHT regarding any National Register-eligible historic structures.
- USDA-ARS would require, in the event that unexpected cultural resources were found during construction activities, the contractor to stop work and consult with the MHT.
- USDA-ARS would require that the transportation of construction equipment and materials over local roads be scheduled to occur after peak traffic periods, whenever possible.
- USDA-ARS would require contractors to minimize construction-related noise impacts by limiting construction-related activities to the hours between 7:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. on weekdays.
- USDA-ARS would require that, upon commencement, the construction phase be executed expeditiously to minimize the period of disturbance to the affected environment.
- USDA-ARS would require that visual mitigation be employed at sites with visual impacts, similar to the mitigation proposed for the NAL.

Careful design, the use of good engineering and best management practices, and the implementation of certain construction and operational procedures would avoid, minimize, or mitigate these minor and moderate potential adverse impacts presented in the EA to a less than significant level.

IV. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The Draft EA is available for the 30-day public review during **September 27, 2018** to **October 27, 2018**, public notices were published in the *Prince George's Sentinel*, *Prince George's Post*, *Greenbelt News Review*. The Draft EA and Finding of No Significant Impact were made available for public review at the following locations; **BARC, 10300 Baltimore Avenue, Building 003, Room 009, Beltsville, MD 20705**, **the USDA National Agricultural Library, 10301 Baltimore Avenue, Beltsville, MD, 20705**, **College Park Community Library, 9704 Rhode Island Avenue, College Park, MD 20740**, and **Beltsville Branch Library, 4319 Sellman Road, Beltsville, MD 20705**. The documents are also available on the following ARS websites: <https://www.nal.usda.gov/> and <https://www.ars.usda.gov/northeast-area/> to notify interested persons and organizations of the availability of the Draft EA and FONSI for public review and comment.

Additionally, the Draft EA and Finding of No Significant Impact were sent directly to Federal, State, and County agencies and other interested parties, reference Table 16 in the draft EA for the distribution list.

Affidavits of publication will be provided in the Appendix of the Final EA. The deadline for public comment on this Proposed Action is the 27th October 2018.

V. FACTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Implementation of the mitigation measures discussed above and in the respective sections of the EA would reduce the potential impacts of the Proposed Action, resulting in no significant adverse impacts to the environment. An Environmental Impact Statement is, therefore, not required.

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