## FCC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT PROCESSING

Under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), agencies must consider whether their major actions may have a significant effect on the environment. This document is intended to provide guidance to assist applicants, including licensees, registrants, and owners of facilities supporting FCC-licensed service, in complying with the FCC's rules implementing NEPA, and does not replace the Commission's rules, which control in cases of ambiguity or difference in language.

The FCC's environmental rules require applicants proposing to construct facilities intended to support FCC-licensed services to consider whether these projects may have a significant environmental impact. As part of satisfying that requirement—and before (i) certifying that their facilities will have no significant environmental impact on an FCC application, if required, or (ii) initiating any associated ground disturbance prior to construction—applicants must evaluate whether a proposed project triggers an environmental assessment (EA). Depending on that evaluation, applicants may need to prepare and file an EA that is subject to FCC review and public comment.

Specifically, applicants must prepare EAs for actions that may have a significant environmental impact when proposed facilities meet one or more of the circumstances<sup>ii</sup> listed below, unless another federal agency (*e.g.*, a federal land managing agency or the project's funding agency) has assumed responsibility for determining whether the facilities in question will have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment.<sup>iii</sup> Pursuant to the FCC's environmental rules,<sup>iv</sup> an EA is required for:

- (1) Facilities that will be located in an officially designated wilderness area;
- (2) Facilities that will be located in an officially designated wildlife preserve;
- (3) Facilities that may affect listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitats, or are likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any proposed endangered or threatened species or likely to result in the destruction or adverse modification of proposed critical habitats, as determined by the Secretary of the Interior pursuant to the Endangered Species Act of 1973;
- (4) Facilities that may adversely affect districts, sites, buildings, structures or objects that are listed, or are eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places where the adverse effect has not been mitigated through a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA);
- (5) Facilities that may affect Indian religious sites;
- (6) Facilities that will be located in a floodplain, if the facilities will not be placed at least one foot above the base flood elevation of the floodplain;
- (7) Facilities whose construction will involve significant change in surface features (e.g., wetland fill, deforestation or water diversion);
- (8) Facilities that will be equipped with high intensity white lights and located in a residential neighborhood, as defined by the applicable zoning law;
- (9) Facilities that will cause human exposure to levels of radiofrequency radiation in excess of the Commission-prescribed limits; and/or
- (10) Facilities that will be over 450 feet in height above ground level and will involve either new tower construction, tower modification or replacement constituting a substantial increase in size, or certain changes in lighting, thereby requiring that the EA address the proposed project's effects on migratory birds.

The FCC may also require an applicant to prepare an EA upon determining that a facility may otherwise have a significant environmental impact, either in response to an interested person's allegation or on its own motion.<sup>v</sup>

Applicants may use the attached "NEPA checklist" to evaluate the applicability of each of the circumstances listed in section 1.1307. If an EA is required, applicants may consult the attached "EA Checklist" to confirm that their draft document includes the information required by section 1.1311.

## **NEPA CHECKLIST: Evaluating Potential Environmental Effects**

Review this checklist to identify when section 1.1307 circumstances apply and to evaluate whether the proposed facility may have a significant environmental impact. The supporting documentation must be included in an EA, if required; it should be maintained by the applicant as proof of NEPA compliance if no EA is required. Contact Commission staff to determine EA requirements if a project is subject to an EA (or an Environmental Impact Statement) by another federal agency or will be located on Tribal or trust lands for which the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) has assumed environmental review responsibility.

An Environmental Assessment (EA) must be filed when an applicant answers Yes to one or more of the following	g	
circumstances, and should include the specified supporting information:		
(1) Facility will be located in an officially designated wilderness area.	Yes	No
Federally-designated wilderness areas may be administered by federal agencies (e.g., the U.S. Forest Service	( )	( )
(USFS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), National Park Service (NPS), or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS)).		
Wilderness areas may also be designated by state or Tribal governments.		
☐ If the facility is in a non-federal wilderness area or is in a Federal wilderness area but is not subject to review	by ano	ther
federal agency, an EA is required.		
☐ If the facility is not in a wilderness area, include a statement to that effect. If the facility is on USFS, BLM, NPS	, or FV	VS
land, submit documentation showing that it is not within a designated wilderness area.		
(2) Facility will be located in an officially designated wildlife preserve.	Yes	No
A wildlife preserve may be designated in a variety of ways. Federally designated wildlife preserves include	( )	( )
national wildlife refuges as well as some national parks, monuments, and preserves. Many states also		
designate preserves, protected areas, or fish and wildlife areas managed by a state Department of Fish and		
Game or equivalent agency. Local and Tribal governments may also designate wildlife preserves.		
☐ If the facility is in a non-federal wildlife preserve or is in a federal wildlife preserve but is not subject to review	ı by	
another federal agency, an EA is required.		
□ If the proposed facility is not located in an officially designated wildlife preserve, include a statement to that		
explain any measures taken to confirm that the site is not within a designated wildlife preserve. The applican	t shou	ld
cite specifically to the sections of the relevant databases, maps, references, or information from the relevant		
government agencies (e.g., Department of the Interior).		
(3) Facility may affect listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitats; or is likely to	Yes	No
jeopardize the continued existence of any proposed endangered or threatened species or likely to result in	( )	( )
the destruction or adverse modification of proposed critical habitats.		
Consult FWS resources to identify when this circumstance applies. Attach to the EA any relevant		
correspondence with FWS, Memoranda of Agreement/Understanding, Blanket Clearance Letters, Endangered		
Species Act (ESA) Section 4(d) rules, or other conditions and recommendations.		
☐ If no listed <sup>vi</sup> or proposed <sup>vii</sup> threatened or endangered species or designated or proposed critical habitats <sup>viii</sup> are	e prese	ent
in the county or counties where the "action area" is located, explain the basis for the applicant's determinat	ion tha	at:
(i) no listed or proposed threatened or endangered species or designated or proposed critical habitats are pro	esent	
within the county (or counties) of the project's action area and/or; (ii) that there would be no effect on listed	or	
proposed threatened or endangered species or designated or proposed critical habitats within the county (or	count	ies)
of the project's action area. Provide the materials (with citations) that formed the basis for this determinatio	n ( <i>e.g.</i>	,
maps or lists from relevant databases). In most instances, use of FWS's Information for Planning and Conserv	ation	
(IPaC) databasex will be sufficient to determine whether endangered or threatened species are present in the	count	y or
counties, although other databases sometimes contain more specific information that may be used in addition	n to IP	aC.
If IPaC data are not available for the project area, applicants should contact the appropriate local FWS Field C	ffice.	
Include any correspondence from FWS indicating that no endangered or threatened species are present.		
□ If listed or proposed threatened or endangered species or designated or proposed critical habitats are present		
county or counties where the "action area" is located and would not be affected by the proposed facilities, ex		าดพ
the applicant determined that there would be no effect on listed or proposed threatened or endangered spec	cies or	
designated or proposed critical habitats within the county (or counties) of the project's action area. Include a	ıny	
correspondence from FWS indicating that there would be no effect.		
☐ If the applicant did not receive a letter from FWS indicating that there would be no effect, provide an inf		
biological assessment or a description of the protected species in the project area and an explanation of	why th	ne
project will not adversely affect them, prepared by a biologist. Provide the name(s) and qualifications of		
biologist(s) who prepared the biological assessment or description along with any FWS staff who may be		
with its contents.xi Provide the materials (with citations) that formed the basis for the biologist's determined		
(e.g., maps or lists from relevant databases; recommendations from state wildlife agencies or other expe	rts). T	he
applicant's analysis of effects must use the best scientific and commercial data available.		

	If the proposed facility may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect, listed or proposed threatened or endangered species or designated or proposed critical habitats in the action area, provide a letter from FWS concurring with the applicant's informal biological assessment. If any measures are proposed to mitigate effects on species or habitats, the EA must outline those measures with FWS concurrence. For species that require ESA 4(d) Programmatic Biological Opinions (e.g., the northern long-eared bat <sup>xii</sup> and the American burying beetle <sup>xiii</sup> ) the consistency letter provided by FWS needs to be included with the application. If the proposed facility may affect, and is likely to adversely affect, listed or proposed threatened or endangered species or listed or proposed designated critical habitats in the action area, xiv the applicant will need to prepare a formal biological assessment as outlined in 50 CFR § 402.01 et seq. The applicant should first provide the formal biological assessment to the Commission for initiation of formal consultation with the FWS. If any measures are proposed to mitigate effects on species or habitats, the EA must outline any mitigation measures from the Biological Opinion.			
<del>,</del>			No	
	4) Facility may affect districts, sites, buildings, structures or objects significant in American history,	Yes	No	
	rchitecture, archeology, engineering or culture, that are listed, or are eligible for listing, in the National	( )	( )	
1	Register of Historic Places.			
1	Consult the Nationwide Programmatic Agreement (47 CFR Part 1, Appendix C) (NPA) to determine how to			
	evaluate this circumstance. Summarize the results of the Section 106 consultation process in the EA. EAs should			
n	ot include copies of Forms 620/621 or cultural resources reports.	l	J	
	If the proposed facility is excluded from historic preservation review under Section III of the NPA, provide a s	tateme	ent	
	describing why the facilities are excluded. Facilities constructed in industrial parks, strip malls, shopping cent	ers, ar	nd	
	rights-of-way that are otherwise excluded under Section III.D or III.E of the NPA require a table summarizing	the res	ults	
	of Tribal notification completed using the Tower Construction Notification System (TCNS).			
	For all proposed facilities requiring Tribal notification, provide a copy of the Applicant's TCNS "Notice of Orga	nizatio	on"	
	list of notified Tribal Nations and a table summarizing their responses.			
	For proposed facilities that would have no effect or no adverse effect on historic properties, provide a concu	rrence		
	letter from the relevant State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) or Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THF			
	provide other documentation demonstrating how the applicant complied with the NPA.	,		
		de a co	onv	
	of the executed agreement. xvi	uc u c	<b>0</b> P y	
-	5) Facility may affect Indian religious sites.	Yes	No	
1	An applicant's documentation that it has completed the TCNS process will generally suffice to demonstrate	( )	( )	
1	whether the proposed construction may affect Tribal religious and cultural sites.	( )	\ \ \	
			J al :.a	
	the EA. Any information regarding historic properties or religious or sacred sites to which a Tribal Nation att			
	significance may be highly confidential, private, and sensitive, and applicants should respect the wishes of the	e mba	11	
_	Nation with respect to the treatment of such information.			
1	6) Facility will be located in a floodplain, if the facility will not be placed at least one foot above the base	Yes	No	
1	lood elevation of the floodplain.	( )	( )	
1	Provide a copy of the relevant Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) map showing the location of the			
	proposed facility relative to the 100-year floodplain. If that map is unavailable, provide the best available data.		J <u>.</u>	
	If the facility will be located in a floodplain and elevated at least one foot above the base flood elevation of the			
	floodplain, provide documentation that the proposed structure and associated equipment will be at least on	e foot		
	above the floodplain ( $e.g.$ , local building permit, construction plans).			
	If the facility will be located in a floodplain and will not be elevated at least one foot above the base flood ele	vation	of	
	the floodplain,xvii provide an explanation of (i) why the facility (including equipment) will not be elevated and	(ii)		
	evidence of measures to be taken to ensure resilience in the event of floods and mitigation of impacts to the	floodp	olain.	
(	7) Facility construction will involve significant change in surface features (e.g., wetland fill, deforestation,	Yes	No	
s	ignificant tree removal, or water diversion).	( )	( )	
		the		
	character of the land used or in surface features, describe the nature and extent of the change, and discuss a		orts	
	to mitigate these changes. xviii Examples of substantial change may include clearing trees, vegetation, desert	•		
	shrubland, or topsoil to an extent that would cause a clearly detectable change in a forest or ecological comm		and	
	may have an appreciable impact on that community; the diversion of a water course; and wetland fill.		3110	
		ceives	1	
			4	
	from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers or other permitting authority authorizing the construction of the prop	osea		
_	antenna structure.			
1	structure and associated equipment will not be located in a wetland. The Applicant should use FWS's Nation	al		
	Wetlands Inventory maps and/or best available data.	ai		

(8)	Facility (antenna tower and/or supporting structures) will be equipped with high intensity white lights	Yes	No
whi	ch are to be located in residential neighborhoods, as defined by the applicable zoning law.	( )	( )
	If the facility will be equipped with high intensity white lights and located in a residentially zoned neighborho	od, the	EA
	must address the impact of the lighting to residents. xix		
	If the facility will be equipped with high intensity white lights but will not be located in a residentially zoned		
	neighborhood, provide documentation of the location's zoning classification or explain the absence of zoning	g.	
	If the facility will not be equipped with high intensity white lights (i.e., FAA Lighting Style B, C, F, or G), docum	nent the	2
	lighting style to be used (if any).xx		
(9)	Facility would cause human exposure to levels of radiofrequency radiation in excess of Commission-	Yes	No
ado	pted guidelines.	( )	( )
	For facilities that do not qualify for an exemption pursuant to § 1.1307(b)(3), applicants must prepare an eva	luation	of
	human exposure to radiofrequency radiation confirming compliance with the limits in § 1.1310. Mitigation a		
	required to the extent necessary to ensure compliance with the limits pursuant to § 1.1307(b)(4). An EA is re		
	for facilities that will exceed the limits set out in § 1.1310.xxi	•	
(10)	Facility will be over 450 feet above ground level (AGL).	Yes	No
Nev	v construction of a tower over 450 feet AGL,xxii replacement of a tower over 450 AGL that involves a	()	( )
sub.	stantial increase in size to the original tower, modification of an existing tower over 450 feet AGL that		
con	stitute a substantial increase in size of a tower, xxiii or certain lighting changes to a tower over 450 feet AGL xxiv		
req	uire an EA addressing the proposed facility's effects on migratory birds. Consult FWS guidelines for		
info	rmation on avoiding adverse effects to migratory birds.		
	Document the location of the project in relation to wetlands, other Programmatic Environmental Assessmen	t-ident	fied
	locational features, National Wildlife Refuges, National Audubon Society Important Bird Areas (IBAs), Habita	ıt	
	Conservation Plan (HCP) areas, and other areas that may be environmentally sensitive for migratory birds.	<b>Applicar</b>	nt
	should cite specifically to the sections of relevant databases, maps, references, or to information from relevant	int	
	government agencies (e.g., Department of the Interior).		
	If applicable, explain how the applicant will provide lighting under the proposed tower and associated building	ngs. No	)
	lighting or motion-sensor lighting is preferred.		
	Explain how the applicant determined whether there are Bald Eagle or Golden Eagle nests within 0.5 miles or	f the	
	proposed antenna structure.		
	If the proposed facility requires mitigation, or any measures are proposed to mitigate effects on migratory bit	rd spec	ies
	or habitats, describe such measures. Include copies of any Blanket Clearance Letters, Memoranda of		
	Agreement/Understanding, and other FWS conditions or recommendations, as well as any conditions or		
	recommendations of state wildlife agencies.		
	If the proposed facility will include steady-burning lights, explain the reasons for using such lighting.		

- xi If available, provide information about post-high school formal education including degrees held, areas of expertise, years of experience, and membership in any relevant professional accreditation organizations.
- xii Revised Tower Construction Guidance for Protection of the Northern Long-Eared Bat Under the Endangered Species Act, Public Notice, DA 21-1501 (WTB Dec. 2, 2021).
- wiii Wireless Facility Construction Guidance Within the American Burying Beetle's Range, Public Notice, DA 21-1500 (WTB Dec. 2, 2021).
- xiv An EA is always required under this circumstance.
- <sup>xv</sup> If the proposed facilities are to be located on Tribal land (within the exterior boundaries of any Indian reservation or dependent Indian community) and the Tribal Nation has assumed the SHPO's functions pursuant to section 101(d)(2) of the National Historic Preservation Act, provide a letter from the THPO in lieu of the SHPO. If the proposed facilities are to be located on Tribal land and the Tribal Nation has not assumed SHPO functions, provide letters from both the relevant Tribal official and the SHPO.
- xvi An EA need not be filed when the FCC and applicants have entered into an MOA to mitigate effects of a proposed undertaking on historic properties, if the only basis for the preparation of an EA was the potential for significant effects on such properties. See Implementation of State and Local Governments' Obligation to Approve Certain Wireless Facility Modification Requests Under Section 6409(a) of the Spectrum Act of 2012, WT Docket No. 19-250, RM-11849, Declaratory Ruling and Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, 35 FCC Rcd 5977, 6001, para. 46 (2020).
- xvii An EA is always required under this circumstance.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>i</sup> See 47 CFR § 1.1312.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Certain facilities in designated rights-of-way, as well as collocations on existing structures, need be evaluated only for effects on historic properties and for human exposure to radio frequency emissions. See 47 CFR § 1.1306(c) and Note 1. In addition, construction in an established "antenna farm" need be considered only for human exposure to radio frequency emissions. Id. at Note 3.

iii See 47 CFR § 1.1311(e).

iv See 47 CFR § 1.1307(a), (b).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>v</sup> See 47 CFR § 1.1307(c), (d).

vi "Listed species" are defined as any species of fish, wildlife or plant which has been determined to be endangered or threatened under section 4 of the ESA. See 16 U.S.C. § 1533.

vii "Proposed species" is defined as any species of fish, wildlife or plant that has been proposed in the Federal Register to be listed under section 4 of the ESA. See 16 U.S.C. § 1533.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Critical habitat" is defined in section 3 of the ESA. See 16 U.S.C. § 1533.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>ix</sup> U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service defines an "action area" as "all areas to be affected, directly or indirectly, by the federal action and not merely the immediate area involved in the action." See 50 CFR § 402.02(d). For example, an action area would include the site of the proposed antenna structure, its immediate vicinity, and any roads to be constructed to the tower site by the applicant.

<sup>\*</sup> U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, *IPaC Information for Planning and Consultation*, https://ipac.ecosphere.fws.gov/ (last visited June 2, 2022).

xviii See 47 CFR § 1.1311(b).

xix See 47 CFR § 1.1311(a)(1).

xx See Federal Aviation Administration, Advisory Circular 70/7460-1, Obstruction Marking and Lighting (Nov. 16, 2020).

xxi 47 CFR § 1.1307(b)(1)(i)(B).

xxii National Environmental Policy Act Compliance for Proposed Tower Registrations, Effects of Communications Towers on Migratory Birds, WT Docket Nos. 08-61, 03-187, Order on Remand, 26 FCC Rcd 16700, 16731, para. 78 (2011) (Order on Remand).

xxiii See id., citing Nationwide Programmatic Agreement for Review of Effects on Historic Properties for Certain Undertakings Approved by the Federal Communications Commission, 47 CFR Part 1, App. C, at § III.C; see also Nationwide Agreement for the Collocation of Wireless Antennas, 47 CFR Part 1, App. B, at § I.C.

xxiv Order on Remand, 26 FCC Rcd at 16731, para. 78. An EA is required if lights are to be added to an unlit antenna structure, or if red steady lights are to be added to an antenna structure. See 47 CFR § 17.4(c)(1)(iii).

## **ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST: Assessing EA Sufficiency**

Pursuant to 47 CFR § 1.1311, an EA must meet certain requirements. If an EA is required after completing the previous checklist, use this checklist to evaluate if the draft EA will meet the section 1.1311 criteria considered during the Commission's review. Commission staff may contact applicants with questions and may return an EA that does not meet these general requirements.

An Environmental Assessment (EA) must meet the following:				
(1)	The EA should not be conclusory or argumentative, and should explain the environmental consequences in sufficient detail to enable the agency to reach a determination about the proposal's environmental impact. 47 CFR § 1.1311(b).	Yes ( )	No ( )	
(2)	The EA must include a description of the facilities as well as supporting structures and appurtenances. 47 CFR § 1.1311(a)(1). (The description should include, for example, any equipment, parking, fencing or access road construction associated with the site, tree-clearing of guy wire paths, as well as any trenching, power lines and poles, or construction associated with the provision of utilities. The EA should also include the total project footprint and analyze the associated impacts.)	Yes ( )	No ( )	
(3)	The EA must include a description of the site and surrounding area and uses. 47 CFR § 1.1311(a)(1).	Yes ()	No ()	
(4)	The EA must include a statement on the site's zoning classification, and communications with, or proceedings before and determinations made by, zoning, planning, environmental, or other local, state, Tribal, or federal authorities on matters relating to environmental effects. 47 CFR § 1.1311(a)(2).	Yes ( )	No ( )	
(5)	The EA must include a statement as to whether construction of the facilities has been a source of controversy on environmental grounds in the local community. 47 CFR § 1.1311(a)(3).	Yes ()	No ( )	
(6)	The EA must include a discussion of environmental and other considerations which led to the selection of the particular site and facility. 47 CFR § 1.1311(a)(4).	Yes ( )	<b>No</b> ( )	
(7)	The EA must include a discussion of the nature and extent of any unavoidable adverse environmental effects. 47 CFR § 1.1311(a)(4).	Yes ( )	<b>No</b> ( )	
(8)	The EA must include a discussion of any alternative sites or facilities which have been or might reasonably be considered. 47 CFR § 1.1311(a)(4). (Reasonable alternatives include those that are practical or feasible from the technical and economic standpoint and using common sense, rather than simply desirable from the standpoint of the applicant. Consideration of these alternatives need not require detailed analysis, but should state why they are impractical or infeasible. A no action alternative could be "no service" or "no improved service.")	Yes ( )	No ( )	
(9)	The EA must include a discussion of any site feature that has special environmental significance ( <i>e.g.</i> , wildlife preserves; migration paths for birds and wildlife; sites of archaeological, historic, or architectural value; natural or designed landscapes). 47 CFR § 1.1311(b).	Yes ( )	No ( )	
	The EA must specify the effect of the facilities on any historically significant properties that are listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places. 47 CFR § 1.1311(b).	Yes ( )	<b>No</b> ( )	
(11)	The EA must describe any substantial change in the character of the land utilized (e.g., deforestation, water diversion, wetland fill, or other extensive change of surface features). 47 CFR § 1.1311(b).	Yes ( )	No ( )	
	In the case of wilderness areas, wildlife preserves, or other like areas, the EA must include a discussion of the effect of any continuing pattern of human intrusion into the area (e.g., necessitated by the operation and maintenance of the facilities). 47 CFR § 1.1311(b).	Yes ( )	No ( )	
(13)	The EA must include evidence of site approval from local or federal land use authorities. 47 CFR § 1.1311(c).	Yes ( )	<b>No</b> ( )	
(14)	The EA must include any other information the FCC has requested, if applicable.	Yes ( )	<b>No</b> ( )	