



Natural Resources Conservation Service

3381 Skyway Drive  
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## **Finding Of No Significant Impact For Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers Sustainable Irrigation Expansion Project Barbour, Bullock, Coffee, Covington, Dale, Henry, Houston, Geneva, and Pike Counties, Alabama**

### **Introduction**

The Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers Sustainable Irrigation Expansion Project is a federally assisted action authorized for planning under Public Law 83-566, the Watershed Protection and Flood Prevention Act. This act authorizes the Natural Resources Conservation Service to provide technical and financial assistance to local project sponsors. The local sponsor of the Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers Sustainable Irrigation Expansion Project is the Alabama Soil and Water Conservation Committee. An environmental assessment was undertaken in conjunction with the development of the watershed plan. This assessment was conducted with local, State and Tribal Governments; Federal agencies; and interested organizations and individuals. Data developed during the assessment are available for public review at the following location:

<https://alabamasoilandwater.gov/>

### **Recommended Action**

Proposed is the installation of irrigation practices on acreage used for agricultural production within the project area, which encompasses 439,666 acres. The proposed action supports the modernization of agricultural production by helping to minimize crop losses due to drought by supplementing soil water holding capacity during periods of uneven rainfall distribution. The watershed plan evaluates expanding irrigation on 16,800 acres of farmland within the watershed. Conservation measures will be planned and applied based on the Natural Resource Conservation Service's 9 step planning process, which includes onsite environmental evaluation/consultations to avoid, minimize, and/or mitigate possible impact on the surrounding environmental resources. The Sponsoring Local Organization will conduct a sign-up, rank applications, and fund approved applicants. The irrigation practices proposed for cost-share include Low Pressure Center Pivots, Micro-Irrigation, Linear/Lateral Irrigation, Tow/Traveler Irrigation, Plasticulture, and Hand-Moved/Solid Set Sprinklers. Power systems available for cost-share may include but are not limited to phased electricity and power units. The sources of water that will potentially be used for the diffused irrigation systems include surface stream and/or groundwater, depending on what sources are available at the specific site level. The type of irrigation infrastructure and necessary practices (pipes, pumps, power, application equipment, well development) and water source selected will vary depending on site specific conditions.

## **Effect of Recommended Action**

The recommended action would support the sustainable expansion of irrigation within the watershed. Depending on farmer application needs, this action will allocate funding for the development or additions to water delivery/supply infrastructure and/or irrigation application equipment at the farm level.

In consideration of the analysis documented in the Environmental Assessment (EA) completed August 2021, the preferred alternative will not have a significant impact on the quality of human or natural environment.

The EA evaluated both the beneficial and adverse impacts of the proposed action. However, there may at times be minor site-specific adverse environmental effects that primarily will be short term and occurring during the implementation period. Because there is potential to adversely affect one type of resource while improving the condition of another resource, there may at times be minor site-specific adverse environmental effects that primarily will be short term and occurring during the implementation period. NRCS policy at 7 CFR part 650.3(b)(4) requires that NRCS plans minimize adverse effects before NRCS provides technical or financial assistance. In addition, NRCS has in the past, and will continue to prepare documentation of a site-specific environmental evaluation, and will consult with the appropriate organizations to avoid, minimize, or otherwise mitigate adverse impacts on natural resources. As part of this process, NRCS also complies with requirements for protecting unique geographic features and other resources, as well as NRCS policies protecting natural resources. Thus, any adverse effects that may result from this program will occur at a much lower threshold than the environmental impact statement (EIS) threshold.

The proposed action will not result in significant adverse effects on public health or safety. The project will consist of on-farm irrigation and appropriate measures will be taken on a site-specific basis to avoid, minimize or mitigate the potential for adverse effects that might occur to public health and safety during implementation.

There is no evidence indicating there will be any significant adverse effects to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas from selection of the proposed action. Consulting as required with agencies having jurisdiction over these resources also helps NRCS to avoid significant adverse effects on a site-specific basis.

The proposed action will encourage and promote agricultural enterprises in the watershed through increased irrigation. This action will tend to offset pressures to convert important farmland to other uses, such as residential development.

The effects of this action on the quality of the human environment are not controversial. All NRCS conservation practice standards are published for public comment in the Federal Register before being adopted to ensure integration of appropriate science and to identify and resolve any related controversy. It is only through the implementation of these conservation practices that this project would affect the environment. Any controversies that may arise from a site-specific application will be identified during the environmental evaluation process and appropriate mitigation measures applied.

The proposed action will have minor effects on both the surface and groundwater supply. Currently there is approximately 22,171 irrigated acres in the watershed. Current average irrigation demand from groundwater supplies is less than one percent of any aquifer

recharge in the Basin. On average, 64 percent of irrigation withdrawals in the basin are surface water sources while 36 percent of irrigation withdrawals are from groundwater. Using conservative estimates as the threshold for the Preferred Alternative, the Watershed could support up to 168,975 irrigated acres. The effects, modeled at the 8-digit hydrologic unit (HUC-8) are anticipated to be minor. The Preferred Alternative may have localized impacts on smaller tributaries and watersheds within the project watershed. These effects will be mitigated by providing irrigated acreage density at the HUC-12 level to the NRCS and Sponsoring Local Organization during site selection. Promoting expanded irrigation in HUC-12s that have less than 10 percent of the overall drainage areas as irrigated acres is recommended to protect local water supplies and existing irrigation investments.

The proposed action is anticipated to have only minor effects on both surface and groundwater quality. These minor site-specific adverse effects will be short term and occurring during the construction period. Water quality could be impacted by increased nutrient runoff into surface waters, increased turbidity due to sediment transport and/or biological productivity, or nutrient leaching into groundwater due to irrigation applied in excess of field capacity. However, best management practices, such as irrigation water management plans will be required. Projections for increased sediments or nutrients carried by surface waters are minor when the soil moisture is maintained at or below field capacity as would be required by NRCS conservation practice standards.

The proposed action is not considered highly uncertain and does not involve unique or unknown risks. Conservation practices implemented under NRCS programs are supported by science and have been demonstrated to improve natural resource conditions.

The proposed action will not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. As stated in the EA, NRCS follows the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation's regulations for implementation of section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and related policy guidance to ensure historic properties are considered during project and program planning. NRCS also has a programmatic agreement with the Alabama Historical Commission to ensure appropriate steps are taken to identify and avoid adversely affecting these resources as conservation practices are implemented.

The proposed action will not adversely affect endangered or threatened species, marine mammals, or critical habitat to any significant degree. NRCS regularly consults with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, to ensure these species are not jeopardized, adverse effects are minimized, and that there are no adverse modifications to designated critical habitat.

The proposed action does not threaten to violate Federal, State, or local requirements imposed for protection of the environment. The NRCS Environmental Evaluation (EE) Worksheet identifies requirements for protection of the environment to ensure they are considered and that adverse effects are addressed during the EE process, normally by consultation with the agency having jurisdiction. As a result, the proposed action is consistent with the requirements of these laws and related policies.

## **Alternatives**

The planned action is the most practical means of increasing irrigation acreage in the watershed in a sustainable, environmentally conscious manner. Because no significant adverse environmental impacts will result from installation of the measures, the only other alternative considered was the future-without-project alternative.

### **Consultation-Public Participation**

Public meetings were held throughout the planning process to keep all interested parties informed of the study progress and to obtain public input to the plan and environmental evaluation.

A scoping meeting comprised of State, Federal, and NGO representatives took place on September 9, 2018 in Montgomery, AL. Attendees discussed the planning process and potential resource concerns and provided feedback and suggestions on the State Resource Assessment. After this meeting, the Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers Basin was selected for scoping.

On December 18, 2018, a meeting was held to scope farmer interest and agricultural needs in the Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers Basin.

A meeting with the NRCS District Conservationists in the Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers Basin was held on July 11, 2019 in Coffee County. This meeting identified potentially successful alternatives to meet the needs of this basin, potential resource concerns, and specific agencies to invite for cooperation throughout the planning process.

On August 20, 2019, a farmer scoping meeting was held in Enterprise, AL. Attendees included lenders, farmers, ALFA, OWA, irrigation designers. A survey was conducted to receive farmer's feedback related to their irrigation and on-farm needs.

A partner meeting was held on October 18, 2019 in Tuscaloosa, AL to discuss groundwater resources and potential issues in the Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers Basin. This meeting was followed by a larger scoping meeting of Federal, State, and NGO representatives on October 30, 2019 in Montgomery, AL to identify concerns and available data. On November 6, 2019, a public meeting was held in Ozark, AL. On December 17, 2019 a meeting was held with the Choctawhatchee Pea Yellow Rivers Watershed Management Authority (CPYRWMA) for further discussion and consultation regarding the Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers Sustainable Irrigation Expansion Project planning process and details.

NRCS, in a government-to-government consultation, shared the Draft Watershed Plan-EA with 21 Tribal Governments to provide the opportunity to identify any areas within the basin. The tribes were issued an invitation to a virtual Public Meeting on February 26, 2021.

A review meeting and request for comments on the Draft Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers Sustainable Irrigation Expansion Project Plan-EA was held via Zoom on February 26, 2021. Several Federally recognized tribes attended this session.

The following groups attended at least one of the above-mentioned meetings: environmental advocacy groups (The Nature Conservancy, Choctawhatchee Riverkeepers, and Alabama Rivers Alliance), state agencies (ADEM, ADAI, ADECA-

OWR, AHC, GSA, ASWCC CPYRWMA), nongovernmental entities (ALFA, TNC, AACD), federal agencies (NRCS, USGS, USFWS), landowners, local governments, Federally Recognized Tribes, business interests (lenders, irrigation professionals), Alabama Cooperative Extension and academia and academic institutions (AU/ACES, UAH, Tuskegee University).

Agency consultation and public participation resulted in improvements to the plan and environmental assessment to ensure that implementation of the selected plan does not result in significant impacts to the basin. Comments included important concerns to be analyzed at the site-specific level.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the environmental assessment summarized above, and according to the National Environmental Policy Act and the Natural Resources Conservation Service Regulations (7 CFR Part 650), I find that the Proposed Action is not a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. Therefore, no environmental impact statement will be prepared.



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