

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)
REDUCTION AND MANAGEMENT OF FUEL LOADS ON DEPARTMENT OF
AIR FORCE-MANAGED LANDS**

Pursuant to provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 42 United States Code (U.S.C.) 4321-4370h; Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations, 40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Parts 1500 - 1508; and the United States Department of the Air Force (DAF) Environmental Impact Analysis Processes, 32 CFR Part 989, the DAF has prepared the attached Programmatic Environmental Assessment (PEA) to assess the potential environmental consequences from the Proposed Action to implement a wide range of fuels reduction and management activities on DAF-managed lands in the continental United States and Alaska. The attached PEA is incorporated by reference in this finding.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to manage fuel loads to reduce the risk of wildfires that may impair mission capabilities. Reducing and managing fuel loads would allow for mission sustainment and build ecosystem resilience that promotes both ecological biodiversity and sustainability, resulting in the protection of natural and cultural resources as directed by the Sikes Act. The need for the Proposed Action is to reduce and continuously manage fuel loads to protect and enhance built and natural infrastructure and natural and cultural resources, promoting resilient ecosystems to support mission sustainment. Reducing and managing fuels is also needed to reduce the adverse impacts of wildland fires.

Proposed Action and Alternatives

The DAF proposes to implement a wide range of fuels reduction and management activities on DAF-managed lands in the continental United States and Alaska. Fuels reduction and management activities included in the Proposed Action consist of prescribed burns, mechanical treatment, hand treatment, chemical treatment, and targeted grazing. Detailed descriptions of these treatments are provided in **Section 2.1** of the PEA. The Proposed Action would be implemented in accordance with the *Review and Update of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy* (USDA, 2001); Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 4715.03, *Natural Resources Conservation Program*; and Air Force Manual (AFMAN) 32-7003, *Environmental Conservation*.

Aerial treatments (including prescribed burn aerial operations), biological treatments (pathogenic and insects), and use of chemicals other than herbicides are not included in the Proposed Action. The DAF would conduct additional environmental analysis if one or combinations of these treatment methods is considered for implementation in the future.

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action Alternative) and the No Action Alternative, which are analyzed in detail in the PEA, are summarized below.

Alternative 1 (Proposed Action Alternative)

Alternative 1 would implement the proposed fuels treatments described above. The type of fuels treatments implemented at each DAF installation would vary depending on the types of vegetation to be treated, local geographic and climate conditions, and other relevant factors. The fuels treatments would be implemented individually or in various combinations and would be

implemented year-round and/or when environmental conditions (e.g., relative humidity, wind speed, wind direction) reach targets to safely ignite the prescribed fire, although most would be implemented when vegetation is dormant. The flexibility to use multiple treatment methods would allow for more effective management and use of appropriate treatments on a site-specific basis.

Proposed fuels treatment methods would be implemented in accordance with all applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulatory requirements. Proposed fuels treatments would also incorporate and adhere to all applicable standards and best management practices (BMPs) established by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group and the National Association of State Foresters to prevent or minimize potential impacts on local populations and environmental resources. Before implementing a proposed fuels treatment method, the DAF would conduct additional site-specific analysis at each installation to identify the type(s) of vegetation targeted for treatment, the type(s) of treatment method(s) to be used, and local conditions or sensitive resources that could be affected by proposed treatment(s).

No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, the DAF would conduct site-specific environmental analysis for fuels reduction and management activities rather than implementing a programmatic, nationwide approach to these activities. Although the No Action Alternative does not meet the purpose and need, it is analyzed in the PEA in accordance with CEQ NEPA regulations 40 CFR Parts 1500 - 1508 and 23 CFR Part 989 to provide a baseline for the evaluation of potential impacts from Alternative 1. The No Action Alternative represents a potential and viable decision to not implement the Proposed Action.

Summary of Findings

The PEA evaluates the potential effects of Alternative 1 and the No Action Alternative on the following environmental resources: biological resources, water resources, earth resources, cultural resources, hazardous materials, human health and safety, air quality, noise, infrastructure, and environmental justice. The DAF determined that the Proposed Action would have no potential to meaningfully or measurably affect hazardous materials and hazardous waste, socioeconomics, or land use; therefore, those resources were dismissed from detailed analysis in the PEA.

Potential environmental consequences are described at the programmatic level of analysis in the PEA. A PEA allows for the assessment of a group or suite of proposed projects, actions, initiatives, or activities that are similar in scope, scale, magnitude, and nature of potential impacts in accordance with CEQ regulations at 40 CFR § 1501.11. Based on the analysis presented in the PEA, Alternative 1 would generally have short-term adverse impacts and long-term beneficial impacts on most environmental resources listed above. All short-term adverse impacts would cease following completion of each fuels treatment method. Alternative 1 would have no significant short-term or long-term adverse impacts on any environmental resource evaluated in the PEA. The No Action Alternative could potentially have significant short-term or long-term adverse impacts on any environmental resources evaluated in this PEA. Existing fuel loads would increase the threat of large-scale wildfires, reduce mission capabilities, impair aircrew readiness, compromise ecosystem resilience, and potentially result in a loss of critical resources. Additionally, the No Action Alternative could contribute to climate change by increasing the risk of uncontrolled wildfires that would increase greenhouse gas emissions and reduce carbon sequestration.

As a programmatic analysis, the PEA is intended to support DAF installation-level programs by streamlining coordination and analysis. The DAF would conduct additional analysis at each DAF installation before a proposed treatment method would be implemented to evaluate location conditions and potential impacts. Personnel at each installation would review existing NEPA documentation, including this PEA, to determine the extent to which NEPA requirements are met. Based on the programmatic analysis in this PEA, the DAF would conduct additional (or “tiered”) NEPA analyses if site-specific planning for a proposed fuels treatment method determines that the intensity, severity, or duration of potential impacts would exceed those described in this PEA. Thresholds that would trigger additional analysis for each resource are described in the PEA. Any required mitigation measures identified during tiered NEPA analysis would be documented and implemented at the site-specific level.

As part of site-specific planning and/or NEPA analysis for each fuels treatment method, the DAF would conduct consultations, as required, with the following agencies to fulfill applicable regulatory requirements regarding potential impacts on resources under its jurisdiction. Not all fuels treatments at all locations would require consultations with all of the following agencies. The need for consultation would be based on site-specific factors such as the presence of protected resources.

- The US Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administrative Fisheries (National Marine Fisheries Service) regarding the Proposed Action’s potential effects on federally listed threatened and endangered species and other protected and sensitive species, in accordance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, and other relevant laws and regulations.
- Applicable State Historic Preservation Officers regarding potential effects on historic properties listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA).
- The US Army Corps of Engineers and/or applicable state-level regulatory agencies regarding potential impacts on tidal and non-tidal wetlands and other regulated water resources, in accordance with Sections 401 and 404 of the Clean Water Act, Executive Order (EO) 11990, Protection of Wetlands, and other applicable regulatory requirements.
- Federally recognized Native American tribes regarding potential impacts on traditional cultural resources having historic, cultural, or religious significance, in accordance with Section 106 of the NHPA, DoDI 4710.02, DoD Interactions with Federally Recognized Tribes; Department of the Air Force Instruction 90-2002, Interactions with Federally Recognized Tribes; and AFMAN 32-7003, Environmental Conservation.
- State coastal zone managers regarding potential impacts on coastal zone resources, in accordance with the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972 (16 U.S.C. § 1451, et seq., as amended).
- State or local floodplain managers regarding potential impacts on floodplains, in accordance with EO 11988, Floodplain Management.
- Any other applicable agency consultation and compliance requirements identified during site-specific planning or tiered NEPA analysis would be conducted and adhered to at the installation level. Adherence to applicable consultation and regulatory requirements, and incorporation of applicable BMPs during proposed fuels treatments, would prevent or

minimize adverse impacts on environmental resources and ensure they remain less than significant.

- Work planning prescribed burn planning with local and regional US Environmental Protection Agency Clean Air Act officials to minimize the impact to airshed's PM2.5 and PM10 limits.

Cumulative Impacts

The analysis in the PEA indicates that the proposed fuels treatment methods would not be anticipated to contribute to significant impacts when combined with other reasonably foreseeable future actions. The analysis of cumulative impacts from a specific fuels treatment at a particular installation would be conducted if an installation determines that additional tiered NEPA analysis is required. The geographic and temporal boundaries for any such analysis of cumulative effects would be installation specific. The analysis of cumulative impacts at the installation level would consider only those resources that have the potential to be affected from by incremental effects of proposed activities in combination with past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future activities relative to their location.

Public Involvement

The DAF published a Notice of Availability for this Draft PEA and proposed Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) in *USA Today* and the *San Antonio Express-News*. The notice ran for two consecutive days and indicated the availability of the Draft PEA and Proposed FONSI for a 45-day review and comment period. The NOA provided a website address for access to the PEA and Proposed FONSI; contact information for more information; addresses of local libraries where printed copies of the PEA and Proposed FONSI could be viewed; and instructions for submitting comments electronically or by postal mail. Letters announcing the availability of the PEA and Proposed FONSI for public review were sent to the agencies and organizations listed in **Appendix B** during the 45-day public comment period.

The public comment period ended on April 10, 2024. One public comment on the Draft PEA was received and is provided in **Appendix B**.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After review of the PEA for Reduction and Management of Fuel Loads on DAF-Managed Lands, incorporated by reference, I have determined that the Proposed Action will not have a significant impact on the quality of the human or natural environment with implementation of the identified regulatory compliance measures. Accordingly, an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. The signing of this FONSI completes the environmental impact analysis process.

ROBERT LIU, COLONEL, DAF
NEPA Division Chief, AFCEC

DATE