



EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
COUNCIL ON ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20503


CHAIRMAN

December 9, 2002

MEMORANDUM

TO: Ann M. Veneman
Secretary of Agriculture

Gale A. Norton
Secretary of the Interior

FROM: James L. Connaughton 
Chairman

SUBJECT: Guidance for Environmental Assessments of Forest Health Projects

The President's Healthy Forests Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities (August 22, 2002) called for administrative improvements that ensure more timely decisions, greater efficiency, and better results in projects that reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires and restore forest and rangeland health. Such improvements will help reduce threats to community safety and better protect wildlife and ecosystems, as well as improve water and air quality. To this end, the President directed CEQ to develop guidance to ensure consistent procedures under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for fuels reduction and fire-adapted ecosystem restoration projects, including development of a model Environmental Assessment (EA) for such projects. EAs provide valuable information for assessing the environmental impacts of projects. These projects will provide important data for monitoring performance as the agencies' work to reduce the threat of severe fires and promote healthy forests and rangeland under *A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment – 10 Year Comprehensive Strategy and its Implementation Plan*.

The following briefly describes core elements of the EA process and provides an outline for an EA document tailored to forest and rangeland health projects. Field staff, with guidance from senior advisors, will use the EA outline in the field over the next several months to complete EAs for different types of forest and rangeland health projects. Based on this experience, we will provide examples of completed EAs to be used as models and may develop more substantive protocols.

Environmental Assessment (EA) Process for Forest Health Projects

1. Your EA should be “a concise public document” of no more than 10-15 pages that:
 - Describes sufficient information and analyses for determining whether to prepare an environmental impact statement or a finding of no significant impact;
 - Helps you document NEPA compliance when no EIS is needed;
 - Facilitates your preparation of an EIS when one is necessary. 40 CFR 1508.9.

Your EA must address the following four elements:

- Statement of need for your proposed action;
 - Description of alternatives as required by NEPA section 102(2)(E);
 - Description of the environmental impacts of the proposed action and alternatives;
 - List of the agencies and persons you consulted. 40 CFR 1508.9.
3. Your EA should reference any supporting data, inventories and other documents on which you relied. You may, but are not required to, use the EA to document project compliance with other statutes.
 4. You must involve interested agencies and the public in your preparation of the EA to the extent practicable. See 40 CFR 1501.4(b). The 10-Year Implementation Plan calls for a collaborative process to identify and prioritize projects. The EA process provides you flexibility in how you involve interested parties in the most efficient and effective manner to obtain input on the EA.
 5. If you prepare a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) you should attach the EA and incorporate it by reference. Note that your draft FONSI must be available for a 30 day public comment: 1) when your proposed action is without precedent, or 2) when your proposed action is similar to one that normally requires an EIS.
 6. As the EA and FONSI are ready, you must provide reasonable public notice of their availability.
 7. If you determine that an EIS is necessary, you must prepare and publish a Notice of Intent (NOI) that briefly describes: 1) the proposed action and alternatives identified; 2) your proposed scoping process, and 3) your agency contact for further information.

Contents of a Model Forest Health Environmental Assessment

Need for the Proposal

- Briefly describe the existing condition, the desired future condition, and how the forest health project will achieve the desired condition.
- Briefly describe information that substantiates the need for the project; incorporate by reference information that is reasonably available to the public.

Proposed Action and Alternatives

- List and briefly describe your proposed action and any alternatives that meet the project purposes. You have discretion as to the number of alternatives.
- When there is consensus about the proposed action based on input from interested parties, you can consider the proposed action and proceed without consideration of additional alternatives. Otherwise, you need to develop reasonable alternatives to meet project needs. (NEPA section 102(2)(E)).

Environmental Impacts of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

- Describe the environmental impacts of your proposed action and each alternative. Your alternatives must meet the purpose and need of the forest health project.
- Your description should provide enough information to support a determination to either prepare an environmental impact statement or find no significant impact.
- Concentrate on whether the action would “significantly” affect the quality of the human environment. You should use CEQ’s definition of “significantly,” 40 CFR 1508.27, as a general guide and, where applicable, cite to agency guidance, policies, monitoring and experience, including prior significance determinations documented in related or analogous NEPA decisions.
- Tailor the length of your discussion to the complexity of the impacts.
- You may discuss the impacts (direct, indirect and cumulative) of each alternative together in a comparative description or discuss each alternative separately.
- You may contrast the impacts of the proposed action and alternatives with the current condition and expected future condition in the absence of the project. This would constitute consideration of a no-action alternative.
- Incorporate by reference data, inventories, other information and analyses you relied on. The use of hyperlinks in web-based documents is encouraged. This information must be reasonably available to the public.
- You should be clear and concise about your conclusions.

Agencies and Persons Consulted.

- List the agencies and persons consulted.