

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
FOR THE COMBINED COMMUNITY COMMUNICATIONS FACILITY AND
INFRASTRUCTURE CLEANUP ON THE FITZNER/EBERHARDT ARID LANDS
ECOLOGY RESERVE, HANFORD SITE, RICHLAND, WASHINGTON
(DOE/EA-1660)**

AGENCY: U.S. Department of Energy, Richland Operations Office

ACTION: Finding of No Significant Impact

SUMMARY: The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA), DOE/EA-1660, to assess the environmental impacts associated with consolidating existing communications operations and removing excess facilities and infrastructure within the Fitzner/Eberhardt Arid Lands Ecology Reserve (ALE), located on the Hanford Site in Benton County, Richland, Washington. The proposed actions analyzed in the EA are within the scope of the forthcoming Draft Tank Closure and Waste Management (TC&WM) Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and are referred to as “interim actions.” DOE prepared this interim action EA before completing the TC&WM EIS process to take advantage of opportunities to accelerate remediation actions and reduce the physical footprint on ALE, thus improving the landscape and minimizing impacts to existing cultural and biological resources. Implementation of the proposed actions evaluated in this EA will not prejudice decisions to be made under the TC&WM EIS or limit DOE’s choices from among the alternatives evaluated in the EIS.

Based on the analyses of potential environmental impacts in the final EA and considering the public comments received on the draft EA, DOE has determined that the proposed action is not a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment within the meaning of the “National Environmental Policy Act of 1969” (NEPA), 42 U.S.C. 4321, et seq. Therefore, the preparation of an EIS is not required.

PROPOSED ACTION: DOE proposes to remove most facilities on ALE, except those needed for ongoing operations by DOE and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) as well as communications equipment currently used by local governments and other organizations. Existing communications capabilities would be consolidated into a single facility on the ridgeline, consisting of an equipment building and two towers to support multiple antennas and radio repeaters. In addition, DOE would remove miscellaneous debris that is located across ALE from past activities, move an access gate to enhance security, and repair the ALE boundary fence as necessary.

The habitat at ALE has been protected since the 1940s, and since 2000, it has been included in the Hanford Reach National Monument, portions of which are managed by the USFWS. Four

major areas within ALE are the subject of proposed actions in the EA: 1) an area along the ridgeline of Rattlesnake Mountain, 2) the former Nike missile site at the northeastern base of the mountain, 3) the Rattlesnake Springs area near the northwestern base of the mountain, and 4) other areas within ALE between the former Nike missile site and the springs where various types of debris remain from previous uses.

Combined Community Communications Facility: DOE's proposed action would support continued communications operations on the Rattlesnake Mountain ridgeline by consolidating and co-locating services to reduce the number of facilities and overall footprint, lessening both the visual impact and the impact of people on the sensitive habitat on the ridgeline. The consolidated facility would consist of two towers and a maintenance and operations building. One existing 100-foot tower would be extended by 20 feet, and a new 180-foot tower would be constructed near the first tower. This facility would serve the needs of the existing communications tenants on the ridgeline, allowing the removal of six existing towers and associated support buildings from the ridgeline. The access road to the ridgeline would be maintained to continue to provide access for the communications tenants.

Facility Demolition: In addition to removing communications facilities from the ridgeline, DOE proposes to demolish most of the DOE buildings located at the former Nike missile site area, on the ridgeline, and at the Rattlesnake Springs area. The buildings to be removed total about 4580 m² (49,400 ft²). Several still-serviceable structures would remain in place for use by the USFWS in management of the National Monument.

Cleanup of Debris: There are a number of abandoned miscellaneous items scattered across ALE. Examples include fence posts, coiled wire cable and barbed wire, conduit, rusted metal buckets and barrels, broken bricks, chunks of concrete, boards, and wooden posts. These items would be collected and disposed of in a manner that minimizes environmental impacts.

ALTERNATIVES: DOE considered several alternatives for the provision of communications capability, including the alternative of No Action as required by NEPA.

No-Action Alternative. The No-Action Alternative consists of not constructing a Combined Community Communications Facility. Instead, communications users would continue to use the seven towers and associated facilities currently located on the ridgeline and continue to maintain and operate the towers as necessary for emergency management and commercial communications requirements. The access road to the ridgeline would continue to be maintained to allow users to access and maintain the communications equipment.

The unneeded DOE facilities would remain in place with little ongoing maintenance. The boundary fence would continue to degrade in places and debris located across ALE would be left in place.

Other Alternatives. DOE considered whether the communications facilities could be moved to another promontory in the region. Although this alternative is not within the scope of DOE's authority, Energy Northwest prepared a study to evaluate the possibility of moving the communications towers currently located on the ridgeline to another location within Benton or Franklin Counties.

Based on this study, although some individual communications providers could potentially relocate to other promontories, it was determined that no location exists in Benton or Franklin Counties that could provide the broad level of coverage for all users currently provided at the Rattlesnake Mountain ridgeline.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS: The EA presents an evaluation of environmental impacts, including impacts on land use, air quality, water quality, geological resources, ecological resources, floodplains and wetlands, cultural and historic resources, socioeconomics, environmental justice, resource commitments, transportation, waste management and pollution prevention, noise, and human health and safety. Cumulative impacts with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable operations in the vicinity were also considered.

Environmental impacts associated with construction of the Combined Community Communications Facility are expected to be similar to those for any facility of comparable size. The facility would be compatible with existing land-use designations established by DOE. Resources required for construction consist of commonly available materials and fuels that are not unique or in short supply, and the labor required represents a small fraction of the local market. Consolidation of existing communications facilities to a smaller footprint is expected to have a net positive effect on visual resources in the near field.

The proposed demolition and cleanup activities would take place in areas associated with existing facilities and debris, which are largely sites that have been disturbed at some time in the past, although some have remained undisturbed for several decades. Activities in these areas, therefore, present the opportunity for disruption of ecological resources that have become established in the interim, or for discovery of cultural and historic sites that were previously unrecognized.

The proposed demolition and cleanup sites are not currently known to contain sensitive ecological resources or critical habitats that would be affected by the proposed activities. Restoration of previously disturbed areas would have a beneficial effect on ecological resources and habitats, and removal of unused facilities and debris is expected to have a net positive effect on visual resources in the near field.

Management of known cultural and historic resources, as well as any discovered during construction and cleanup activities, would be in accordance with regulatory requirements and agreements among DOE and other responsible agencies or parties, including the MOA in

Appendix B to the EA, which is being completed after considering comments and input received from members of the public and area tribes on this EA.

Health and safety risks to workers and members of the public from construction and cleanup activities are projected to be small, although the environment in the ridgeline area presents some unique hazards (such as adverse weather and road conditions) that are not normally present at other Hanford cleanup sites. The proposed activities might have short-term impacts on local traffic and noise levels, and temporary impacts on air quality could also occur. However, because of the remoteness of these activities from occupied areas, they would be unlikely to exceed regulatory standards for noise levels or for air concentrations of criteria pollutants and particulates. Effluents and wastes generated during demolition and cleanup would be minimized to the extent practicable and would be managed using existing facilities.

Operational impacts are expected to be minimal, consisting of occasional use of the consolidated communications facility by communications providers and access for road maintenance. The workforce would remain at about current levels, resulting in little, if any, incremental impact on community infrastructure, socioeconomic, or transportation resources. Because the impacts from facility operations are projected to be small in all cases and due to the remote location, there would be no opportunity for both high and disproportionate adverse impacts on minority or low-income populations, nor would noticeable cumulative impacts in combination with other ongoing operations in the region be expected.

Mitigation of Environmental Impacts. Mitigation of potential environmental impacts associated with construction of the combined community communications facility and cleanup activities would take place as required by existing regulations, agreements, and policies. Restoration of disturbed areas would return them to a more natural state, and cultural and historic resources would be managed in consultation with the State Department of Archaeology & Historic Preservation and Tribal Nations. To that end and pursuant to Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), DOE plans to finalize the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) (included in Appendix B of the Final EA) with the Washington State Historic Preservation Officer and concurring parties, including the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Nez Perce Tribe, and the Wanapum. The stipulations in the MOA are included to address the potential adverse effects from the proposed actions on historic and cultural properties, as discussed in the MOA as well as in the underlying cultural resources review (also included in Appendix B of the Final EA). Potential impacts to ecological resources (as discussed in the ecological resources review included in Appendix C of the Final EA) will also be appropriately mitigated and managed consistent with existing Hanford Site plans and procedures, including the Biological Resources Management Plan. Any potential health and safety risks encountered while implementing the proposed action would be managed in accordance with existing Hanford Site health and safety policies and procedures, with special measures taken as necessary to reduce the risks from working in the unique environment within ALE.

NEPA SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA: Based on the analyses in the EA, as summarized in the previous section, the proposed action would not have a significant effect on the human environment within the meaning of NEPA. The term “significantly” and the significance criteria are defined by the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for implementing NEPA at 40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 1508.27, as listed below.

- 1) Beneficial and adverse impacts [40 CFR Section 1508.27(b)(1)]: The analysis indicates that there will be no significant impacts from implementing the proposed action; restoration of previously disturbed areas would have a beneficial effect on ecological resources and habitats; and removal of unused facilities and debris is expected to have a net positive effect on visual resources in the near field (Section 5.0).
- 2) Public health and safety [40 CFR Section 1508.27(b)(2)]: The analysis indicates emissions of radiological and hazardous contaminants would be small and would not be expected to significantly affect public health (Section 5.5). Removal and disposal of potential low levels of radioactive waste from the areas considered in this EA are unlikely to result in any measurable radiation exposure to workers or members of the public.
- 3) Unique characteristics of the geographical area [40 CFR Section 1508.27(b)(3)]: Implementing the proposed action is intended to improve the unique characteristics of the areas. While short-term impacts to sensitive ecological resources may occur, the proposed action would ultimately reduce the footprint of affected areas, which could be viewed as having an overall net beneficial effect.
- 4) Degree to which effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to become highly controversial [40 CFR Section 1508.27(b)(4)]: The analysis in the EA indicates that implementing the proposed action will not result in significant effects on the quality of the human environment. The extent of public comments received on the draft EA indicate that while the selected action is of some concern, it is not highly controversial.
- 5) Uncertain or unknown risks on the human environment [40 CFR Section 1508.27(b)(5)]: There are no uncertain risks associated with implementing the proposed action.
- 6) Precedent for future actions [40 CFR Section 1508.27(b)(6)]: The proposed action does not set a precedent for future actions.
- 7) Cumulatively significant impacts [40 CFR Section 1508.27(b)(7)]: The analysis in the EA has not identified any significant cumulative impacts associated with implementing the proposed action (Section 5.9).
- 8) Effect on cultural or historical resources [40 CFR Section 1508.27(b)(8)]: The portion of Rattlesnake Mountain under DOE jurisdiction and control has been determined to be a National Register-eligible Traditional Cultural Property and contains historic properties as defined under the NHPA. The consolidation of communication facilities and removal of unneeded buildings and infrastructure from ALE would reduce the footprint of affected areas, which could be viewed as having a net beneficial effect on the overall spiritual qualities and visual and natural setting.

- 9) Effect on threatened or endangered species or critical habitat [40 CFR Section 1508.27 (b)(9)1]: The proposed action would not have an effect on threatened or endangered species or critical habitat (Section 5.3). While short-term impacts to ecological resources may occur, the selected action would reduce the footprint of affected areas, which could be viewed as having a net overall beneficial effect.
- 10) Violation of Federal, State, or Local law [40 CFR Section 1508.27 (b)(10)]: The selected actions would not violate any Federal, state, or local laws (Section 6.0).

DETERMINATION: Based on the analyses of potential environmental impacts in the final EA and considering the public comments received on the draft EA, DOE concludes that the proposed action to reduce the impacts of people and infrastructure on ALE does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment within the meaning of NEPA. Therefore, an EIS for the proposed action is not required. With this determination, DOE can proceed with construction of the combined community communications facility, demolition of unneeded structures, and cleanup of abandoned debris at ALE.

Issued in Richland, Washington, this 20th day of July, 2009.



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AVAILABILITY OF EA AND FURTHER INFORMATION:

The EA (DOE/EA-1660) is available at the DOE Public Reading Room, Consolidated Information Center at Washington State University-Tri-Cities, and may be accessed electronically at: <http://www.hanford.gov/rl/?page=86&parent=52>.

Requests for single copies of the EA or other related information may be referred to:

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