



**UNITED STATES AIR FORCE
JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON,
ALASKA**

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT FOR
PRESCRIBED BURNS AT RICHARDSON TRAINING
AREA**

MAY 2014

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

NAME OF PROPOSED ACTION: Prescribed Burns for Richardson Training Area (RTA) at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson (JBER), Alaska.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION AND NO ACTION ALTERNATIVES

The United States Air Force (Air Force) proposes to use controlled or prescribed burns at Richardson Training Area (RTA) to reduce the amount of woody debris within training areas that are highly susceptible to wildfires. The Proposed Action is to use prescribed burns in May of 2014 to remove grassy and fallen vegetation from approximately 2,100 acres within the RTA. Controlled burns will be conducted at training facilities within the Small Arms Complex, the Infantry Platoon Battle Course (IPBC), the Infantry Squad Battle Course (ISBC), the Digital Multi-Purpose Training Range (DMPTR), and Malemute Drop Zone. Burning methods include the use of broadcast burning of grass and debris pile burning by direct ignition. Debris piles that are proposed to be burned will range from one to twenty-acre units and are distributed throughout these training areas and are made of up fallen trees and underbrush. Prescribed burning is an effective and efficient means to reduce or prevent the accumulation of hazardous fuels. Vegetation that will be targeted is bluejoint reedgrass (*Calamagrostis canadensis*). Development of the Burn Plan and implementation of the prescribed burns would be supported by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Alaska Fire Service (AFS).

The No Action Alternative would be to not utilize prescribed burning at RTA. Without the use of prescribed burns, woody debris and grassy vegetation would continue to build up within the training area. Not implementing a prescribed burn will compromise the Army training mission because the use of certain types of live fire ammunition would be prohibited due to fire danger. The likelihood of a fire erupting as a result of live fire training is high without the removal of these fuel loads. If a fire were to occur, the potential to spread into populated areas within Anchorage, Eagle River, and other surrounding communities would be high.

SUMMARY OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

BACKGROUND: As of 10 October, 2010, Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson reached full operational capability. Fort Richardson and Elmendorf Air Force Base successfully merged operations and have ceased to exist as separately administered facilities. An Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared by the United States Army in 2007 titled, *Environmental Assessment, Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan for U.S. Army Garrison Alaska* evaluated the potential effects of implementing a wide array of ecosystem management projects and activities throughout all Army Installations and training areas in the State of Alaska, to include the former Fort Richardson.

In relevant part to this Proposed Action, the EA analyzed the potential environmental impacts associated with the use of prescribed burns to manage vegetation throughout training areas located on US Army Alaska installations. Specifically to former Fort Richardson, the EA analyzed potential environmental impacts associated with prescribed burning of up to 2,500 acres, annually. The Proposed Action is to use controlled burns as a land management tool and reduce fuel loads on approximately 2,100 acres of land within RTA. The Proposed Action is substantially similar in nature and scope to what was analyzed in the 2007 EA. Specifically the proposed action encompasses a similar acreage of burns, using similar methods and the burns will be conducted in the same timeframe. Pursuant to 32 CFR 989.9(b) this Air Force FONSI formally adopts the analysis, all referenced documents, and analysis incorporated in the *Environmental Assessment, Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan for U.S. Army Garrison Alaska*.

A summary of resources with potential environmental consequences, as analyzed in the 2007 EA, for prescribed burning as outlined in this Proposed Action is presented below.

SOIL RESOURCES: Prescribed burning may present potential adverse impacts to soils as the action will involve the removal of vegetation either mechanically or as a result of combustion. Short-term loss in vegetation from fire can increase the risk of soil erosion but it can also increase the amount of nutrients available in the soil. Best management practices that are currently used within the RTA focus on maintaining and repairing damaged or eroded areas through the Land Rehabilitation and Maintenance (LRAM) program. The goal of the LRAM program is to reduce long-term impacts to training land by combining corrective land reclamation, reshaping, rehabilitation, repair, and maintenance practices.

VEGETATION: Prescribed burning is an effective and efficient means to reduce or prevent the accumulation of hazardous fuels and is a recognized land management practice for natural resources management and fire protection. Even though about 2,100 acres of vegetation would be altered or removed, forest health and wildfire management projects could benefit vegetation by controlling insects and disease and reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfires that can damage natural resources over large areas and endanger communities. There are 21 species of rare plants in the RTA. These plant species would benefit from the prescribed burns in the same manner as other vegetation.

Fire provides both positive and negative impacts to the environment. Short-term loss of vegetation from fire may increase the risk of soil erosion, but fire may also infuse added nutrients to the soil. Impacts from the removal of fallen trees and underbrush vegetation are expected, however due to the use of best management practices to stabilize the soil and reduce or prevent erosion as emphasized through the LRAM program, these impacts are anticipated to be negligible and short-term in nature. Prescribed burning is a recognized land management tool, that when carefully managed results in an overall benefit to the soil and vegetation.

WATER RESOURCES: Implementation of prescribed burns may present the potential for adverse impacts to water resources. This impact is expected to be minor due to procedures in place to prevent or minimize these impacts. Burn piles will not be formed in or through wetlands, nor will trees be extracted from wetlands. In addition there will be no broadcast fires set in wetlands nor will any prescribed burns be employed in flood plains. Controlled burns could benefit water resources by reducing the chances of large uncontrolled wildfire that can lead to erosion and reduced water quality.

WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES: Wildfire management procedures may have minor temporary impacts to wildlife. Prescribed fires would disturb wildlife during the duration of the management activities. Reducing the threat of large scale uncontrollable fires through wildfire management would benefit wildlife by protecting habitat diversity. The Cook Inlet beluga whale is the only endangered species located within the region of influence for the proposed action; however the proposed action does not have the potential to directly impact the beluga or its critical habitat located in Knik Arm. Erosion as a result of prescribed burning is highly unlikely to result in a measureable degradation of water quality in Knik Arm. Several species with legal constraints, such as the rusty blackbird, lesser yellowlegs, the solitary sandpiper, the bald eagle, the golden eagle, trumpeter swan and the little brown bat can be found on JBER. However, the proposed burn treatment areas do not encompass habitat deemed important to any of these species.

The overall impacts to wildlife and fisheries would be beneficial because of implementation of comprehensive resource management programs that improve wildlife habitat, enhance stream bank stabilization and fisheries, promote wildlife survival, and effectively manage watersheds and wetlands. Prescribed burning is part of this overall management strategy that is an accepted and common resource management tool.

PUBLIC ACCESS AND RECREATION: Minor negative and beneficial impacts to public access and recreation may occur as a result of implementing the Proposed Action. As a safety measure during the controlled burns, public access would be temporarily closed within the vicinity of the controlled burns. Periodic prescribed burns ensures that recreational opportunities are sustained.

AIR QUALITY: Implementation of the Proposed Action has the potential to have adverse air quality impacts. Minor to moderate impacts to air quality are expected. These impacts would be temporary, lasting for the duration of the prescribed burn. Open burn approval authorization is required by Alaska Department of Conservation prior to controlled burns exceeding 40 acres per year.

In the time period since the EA was developed in 2007, ambient air quality within the Anchorage Bowl has improved. Whereas prescribed burning has occurred at JBER and other locations

within the Anchorage area, it is apparent that the proposed action does not present a long-term or significant impact in the region of influence.

CULTURAL RESOURCES: The Small Arms Complex; Digital Multi-Purpose Training Range; Infantry Squad Battle Course; Infantry Platoon Battle Course and Malemute Drop Zone are disturbed areas which have already been surveyed and cultural resources would not be impacted by controlled burns. Impacts to cultural resources as a result of the Proposed Action are anticipated to be negligible.

SAFETY: Prescribed burns will take place using standard methods, safety procedures, burn plan requirements and air quality restrictions for prescribed burning (Volume II, Annex C, **Forestry and Wildland Fire Management**, section SC3.2.1, Use of Prescribed Fire of the 2007-2011 Integrated Natural Resource Management Plan for U.S. Army Garrison Alaska which can be found at http://www.usarak.army.mil/conservation/INRMP_Final.htm.

CUMMULATIVE IMPACT: The proposed action is similar to past prescribed burns in that they are of short duration and limited to 2,500 acres per year or less. Therefore the cumulative impact will not create a significant impact.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings in the 2007 *Environmental Assessment, Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan for U.S. Army Garrison Alaska*, conducted in accordance with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act and the Council on Environmental Quality, I conclude that implementation of the Proposed Action, to utilize prescribed burns on the RTA, would not result in significant impacts to the quality of the human or natural environment. Therefore, a Finding of No Significant Impact is warranted and an Environmental Impact Statement is not required for this action.


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Commander

5 MAY 14
Date