

**FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT**

**United States Navy  
Cotton Peak Right of Way and  
Communications Improvement Project**

**Finding of No Significant Impacts**

DOI-BLM-NV-C010-2015-0005-EA

**May 2015**



It is the mission of the Bureau of Land Management to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

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## **BACKGROUND**

On June 26, 1986 the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Carson City District (CCD) issued a Right of Way (ROW) to the Department of the Navy to locate, construct, use, control, maintain, improve, and repair a remote relay station site for the Tactical Aircrew Combat Training System (TACTS) Site No. T23. This ROW is located at Mount Diablo Meridian (MDM), Township (T) 24 North (N), Range (R) 35 East (E) Section 3 Northeast (NE)  $\frac{1}{4}$ , and Southwest (SW)  $\frac{1}{4}$  in Churchill County, Nevada (NV).

The current ROW site does not meet the Navy's needs for current training and communications within the area. The current proposal for the Cotton Peak site is to expand the site to allow for the construction and installation of new equipment at the site and a new helipad to meet current training and communication needs for the Navy. The Cotton Peak site is part of a communication ring that runs from Naval Air Station Fallon (NASF) Main Station to Desert Peak to Bravo-20 (B-20) bombing range to Cotton Peak to New Pass to Fairview and back to NASF Main Station. All range communication (including aircraft tracking) for the Fallon Range Training Complex (FRTC) runs through this ring so any break in the link would compromise naval operations in this area and all communication would stop.

The Cotton Peak project would place a new microwave link that relays between B-20 and New Pass Peak. The current infrastructure in this link is degraded and this project would be step one in repairing that capability. In future years, other upgrades to the B-20 link would be made, but the Cotton Peak upgrades needs to occur before the other upgrades can occur. The current link capability has dropped from three video channels to one and from four data channels to one. The addition of the new microwave relay would increase the broadband capabilities and increase the amount and type of data that is needed for training operations. The new location for the semi-improved helicopter landing area would improve safety for the pilot and any crew that is needed for repair and inspection of the site. It would also allow the maintenance and repair in a wider range of weather conditions.

This link is critical to the FRTC as the current link is degraded and cannot support the amount of data required to support operations. As a result some training has shifted to other ranges, but due to the increasing number of units coming to NASF, this link would need to be upgraded as soon as possible to support current and future training requirements.

The purpose of the Cotton Peak Project (Proposed Action) is to grant the Navy a communications site ROW expansion in Churchill County, Nevada approximately 20 miles northeast of Fallon, NV in T24N, R35 E, MDM, Sec. 3, NE $\frac{1}{4}$  and SW $\frac{1}{4}$  adjacent to the existing ROW site. This ROW amendment would allow the Navy to expand the current ROW, to install a semi-improved helicopter landing area, and to install microwave communication equipment in a location approximately 150 feet away from the existing facilities. The new location of the microwave communication would improve communication with a better line of sight to other communication relays, in the area. The new landing area would improve safety and the ability to perform maintenance on the communication equipment.

The Navy needs the proposed action because the current link is degraded and cannot support the amount of data required to support current operations. The change in location would replace the

current ageing system with a modern one increasing the broadband and give a clear line of sight to the other microwave sites. The increase size and better location of the proposed helicopter landing zone would allow safer access to conduct maintenance and equipment inspections in a larger range of weather situations.

The potential environmental impacts from the Proposed Action and No Action Alternatives were evaluated in the Environmental Assessment (EA) *Cotton Peak Right of Way and Communications Improvement Project* EA# DOI-BLM-NV-C010-2015-0005-EA.

### **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT DETERMINATION**

This finding and conclusion is based on the consideration of the Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) criteria for significance (40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 1508.27), both with regard to the context and the intensity of impacts described in the EA.

Based on the analysis of the *Cotton Peak Right of Way and Communications Improvement Project* EA# DOI-BLM-NV-C010-2015-0005-EA, I have determined that the Proposed Action with identified mitigation measures (identified in Chapter 3 of the EA) will not have a significant effect on the human environment and an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared. This finding is based on the context and intensity of the project as described:

### **CONTEXT:**

The proposed ROW expansion would encompass approximately 1.5 acres (length is 550' by 125' wide), beginning 50 feet south of the current site, extending northward, following the natural ridge line, to a point 75 feet beyond the proposed helicopter landing area and extending 50 feet westward and 75 feet eastward from the natural ridge line. The proposed ROW expansion would be located in Churchill County, Nevada approximately 20 miles north east of Fallon, Nevada in T24N., R35E., MDM, Sec. 3, SE ¼ and SW 1/4.

The site would be accessed only by helicopter during construction and maintenance activities as there are no roads to access the site.

### **INTENSITY:**

The CEQ regulations include the following ten considerations for evaluating intensity:

1) *Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.*

None of the environmental effects discussed in detail in the EA (refer to Chapter 3 Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences) are considered significant, nor do the effects exceed any known threshold of significance, either beneficial or adverse. The Proposed Action is an expansion of an existing communications site right-of-way where a new equipment site and a new helicopter landing area would be created. The laydown area would be on Navy property and helicopter flights would depart from there to land at the construction site to bring workers and materials to the site. The proposed area is a rocky outcrop on the top of a ridge and no roads go to the proposed project area. The Proposed Action is further described in the EA (refer to Chapter 2, Section 2.1 Proposed Action).

Impacts that would result from implementation of the Proposed Action would include:

- Temporary impacts to air quality from helicopter emissions and some minor fugitive dust expected as the site is improved for the helipad;
- Surface disturbing activities associated with the Proposed Action, such as digging the utility trench, leveling the ground where the tower and batteries would be placed, and digging holes for concrete piers, has the potential to result in the spread of invasive/nonnative species in and around the disturbed areas, however any new spread of noxious weeds and invasive or nonnative species would be recorded and treated by the Navy in coordination with the BLM CCD;
- Construction would last for up to 7 days with the use of 4 personnel; project activities would not contribute to any population growth or reduction, nor would it create any new jobs or tax base to the local communities;
- Disturbance of the soil surface during leveling would expose soil and could increase wind- and water-driven erosion, where rocky outcrop is not present; the soils are slightly susceptible to sheet and rill erosion by water and have a low susceptibility to wind erosion. Although soils would be disturbed during construction, their susceptibility to erosion is minimal; wild horses may be displaced by the sound of the helicopter but would return to the area after the helicopter has left;
- Permanent loss of up to 1.5 acres of primarily pinyon-juniper wildlife foraging and/or nesting habitat;
- Noise generated during the construction phase and maintenance of the site (including helicopter landings) could result in wildlife, migratory birds, BLM special status species and wild horses avoiding areas greater than the actual disturbance area until construction activities or maintenance activities are finished;
- Migratory birds could potentially collide with the communication tower (including its support braces) and its associated structures (e.g. photo-voltaic battery charging system);
- The communication tower, which would extend above the existing vegetation within and around the proposed project area, could create an artificial perching and nesting site for raptors and ravens.
- Non-ionizing electromagnetic radiation emitted by communication towers has been correlated with nest and site abandonment, decreased productivity, plumage deterioration, and reduced survivorship for birds utilizing areas around communication towers (Balmori 2005, Balmori and Hallberg 2007, and Everaert and Bauwens 2007);
- Surface disturbing activities associated with the Proposed Action have the potential to result in a negative effect on the visual or scenic quality of the project area, however, since the site is seldom if ever visited by the general public and the roads most likely traveled by the public are a considerable distance from the site, the degree of change to the existing environment is not expected to be noticeable.

Impacts resulting from the Proposed Action, as described in Section 2.1 of the EA, would be mitigated through implementation of mitigation measures identified in Chapter 3 of the EA and by adherence to terms and conditions attached to the ROW grant.

*2) The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.*

The Navy is proposing to expand the current ROW from .06 acres to 1.5 acres and replace the failing equipment located at the Cotton Peak site in the Stillwater Mountains in Churchill County, NV (refer to Appendix 1 of the EA, maps and figures). The Navy is also proposing to replace the current helicopter landing area with one further up the ridge.

Under the Proposed Action, there would be up to 4 workers on-site for 7 days. Overall, implementation of the Proposed Action, the new location of the microwave communication site, would improve communication with a better line of sight to other communication relays, in the area. The new landing area would improve safety for military personnel that are constructing or maintaining equipment in this area.

*3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.*

The site was surveyed for cultural resources in 2012. One site was identified in the project area but was determined not eligible for inclusion to the National Register of Historic Places. There are no park lands, prime farm lands, ecologically critical area or wild and scenic rivers in or near the proposed project activities.

*4) The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.*

The EA was scoped internally by Navy personnel, which also included a site visit, on December 8, 2011. Additional internal scoping meetings were held in November of 2013. BLM resource specialists scoped the project on July 28, 2014. A consultation letter was sent to the Nevada State Historic Preservation Office on January 6, 2012 and a response of concurrence was received on February 6, 2012. The Fallon Paiute-Shoshone Tribe was notified of the project via certified letter on January 12, 2012 and to date no concerns have been received.

The EA was made available for a 30-day public review and comment period on February 23, 2015 until March 25, 2015. A press release was issued on February 23, 2015 to local media outlets and sent electronically to the Nevada State Clearinghouse. The EA was also made available by hard copy at the Carson City District Office and on the District webpage at: [http://www.blm.gov/nv/st/en/fo/carson\\_city\\_field/blm\\_information/nepa.html](http://www.blm.gov/nv/st/en/fo/carson_city_field/blm_information/nepa.html). During the comment period, one comment was received from the Nevada Division of State Lands through the Nevada Clearinghouse regarding lighting at the site. No lighting is proposed for this site and no changes were made to the analysis in the EA.

5) *The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.*

The Proposed Action is not unique or unusual. The action described in Chapter 2 of the EA is an expansion of an existing ROW for additional communication site equipment and new helipad. There are numerous communication sites with similar features throughout the CCD operated by the Navy and other companies. There are no predicted effects on the human environment that are considered highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks. Public comment or concern has been minimal for this project as shown by the 1 comment received during the public comment period.

6) *The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.*

This action will not establish a precedent for future actions within the area, and all future proposed actions within the project area will be analyzed under a separate site-specific environmental analysis and the project will be analyzed on its own merits.

7) *Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.*

Resource values, as identified in this EA, were evaluated for cumulative impacts (Refer to Chapter 4 of the EA) and determined that cumulative impacts would be negligible for the proposed project for all resources.

8) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.*

As described in the EA (refer to Chapter 3 and 4 of the document), the project will not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or other objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, nor will it cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources. No sites eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places are present in the Project Area, as determined during the cultural inventory. Concurrence from the State Historic Preservation Office was received on February 6, 2012. Tribes have not raised any issues of concern on this project to date.

9) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.*

As described in the EA (Refer to Chapter 3), there are no threatened or endangered plant or animal species or their habitat known to occur in the project area.

10) *Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*

As described in the EA, the Proposed Action does not violate any known Federal, State, or local law or requirement imposed for protection of the environment.

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05-08-15

Date