



FEMA

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Idaho Public Safety Communication Sites – Wildfire Mitigation
Oneida, Bannock, and Bingham Counties, Idaho
FEMA-LPDM-PJ-10-ID-2008-007

The State of Idaho Bureau of Homeland Security (BHS) applied to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Legislative Pre-Disaster Mitigation Program for funding assistance with a wildfire fuel load reduction and retrofits project in southeastern Idaho. The State of Idaho Public Safety Communication Sites Wildfire Mitigation Project would reduce risk from wildfire to three state-operated public safety communication sites located in Oneida, Bannock, and Bingham Counties, Idaho.

The State of Idaho operates a comprehensive network of communication sites that traverses the state. Mountainous topography necessitates that communications sites be located on hills and mountaintops to achieve maximum functionality. However, the tops of the hills and mountains are exceptionally vulnerable to wildfires due to increased lightning activity, erratic wind patterns, vegetative fuel types containing more fine fuels that are easy to ignite, and fire behavior characteristics. These remote sites are located in areas with no water supply for firefighting operations and are only accessible by steep, narrow dirt roads with limited turnouts.

The communication sites provide public communications (both land mobile radio systems and microwave systems) to a variety of state, federal, and local agencies. This includes the Idaho BHS, Idaho State Police, Idaho Departments of Fish and Game and Lands, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The sites also provide support to local public safety organizations through cooperative partnerships. While both Malad Ridge and Chinese Peak are located on Federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land and East Butte is located on U.S. Department of Energy (USDOE)/Idaho National Laboratory (INL) land, the sites are leased to the State of Idaho. Moreover, other federal agency facilities may be co-located at these sites.

The loss of any of these remote communications sites and their facilities can create far reaching and serious public safety implications. Currently Idaho's communications network is not configured in a loop. As a result, the loss of any site in the two-way line of communication will result in a loss of intra-state communications in either direction that would have passed through the damaged site. The need for this action is to reduce or eliminate the risk to remote communications sites from wildfires at Malad Ridge, Chinese Peak, and East Butte. From this need, the state of Idaho identified the preferred alternative (vegetative fuel management and facility retrofits) as a high priority in the State of Idaho Hazard Mitigation Plan.

The Proposed Action would remove excessive vegetation on approximately three acres of publicly-owned lands (one acre at each location). The geographic areas targeted for mitigation include Malad Ridge (approximately 12 miles from Malad, Idaho), Chinese Peak (approximately six miles from Pocatello, Idaho), and East Butte (approximately 10 miles from

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Atomic City, Idaho). All work would be done in coordination with the Idaho Department of Lands, BLM, and USDOE/INL.

The vegetation to be removed includes underbrush, grasses, and sage brush. A BLM-approved weed retardant, would be applied to all areas within 50 feet of the radio towers and structures. Following this application, crushed gravel aggregate would be applied to the cleared areas. In addition to creating this defensible space, the roofs and walls of the structures protecting vital communications equipment at Malad Ridge would be replaced with non-combustible materials. A precast concrete building would be constructed around the back-up generator at Chinese Peak for protection. The fuel tanks and fuel line would be protected from radiant heat exposure and direct flame impingement at all three sites by partially burying the existing 500-gallon tanks. A concrete vault, lid, and a dirt berm would be constructed around the fuel tanks for further protection. The proposed project would take three years to complete, and site work would be done mainly during the months of May through August.

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 and FEMA's implementation regulations, FEMA prepared an environmental assessment (EA) to identify and evaluate potential environmental impacts resulting from the alternatives presented in the EA and to determine whether to prepare an Environmental Impacts Statement (EIS) or a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI). Alternatives evaluated in the EA include: 1) structural mitigation and reduction of fuel loads at Malad Ridge, Chinese Peak, and East Butte (Preferred Alternative) and 2) No Action. Other alternatives were considered but not carried forth and are described in the EA. Draft and Revised Draft EAs were made available for public comment on July 10 and November 20, 2009. No substantive comments were received.

FINDINGS

Based upon the attached Project Conditions and Conservation Measures and Final EA, and in accordance with FEMA's regulations in 44 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 10 for environmental consideration, including Executive Orders (EO) addressing floodplains (EO 11988), wetlands (EO 11990), and environmental justice (EO 12898), FEMA determined the proposed project will not significantly affect the quality of the natural and human environment. As a result of this FONSI, an EIS will not be prepared (44 CFR Part 10.8) and the project as described in the attached Final EA may proceed.

APPROVAL



Mark G. Eberlein
Regional Environmental Officer
FEMA Region X

1-4-10
Date

Attachment A:

PROJECT CONDITIONS AND CONSERVATION MEASURES

Mitigation and conservation measures refer to actions that would minimize or eliminate potential adverse environmental impacts that could result from the Proposed Action. Measures include:

- The applicant shall obtain all required local, state, and federal permits and approvals prior to implementing the Proposed Action Alternative and comply with any and all conditions imposed.
- The applicant is responsible for selecting, implementing, monitoring, and maintaining best management practices to control erosion and sediment, reduce spills and pollution, and provide habitat protection (if present).
- Any change to the approved scope of work will require re-evaluation by FEMA for compliance with NEPA and other laws and EOs.
- In the event that archaeological or historic materials or features are discovered during project activities, work in the immediate vicinity should be discontinued, the area secured, and the state and FEMA notified to further evaluate the find.