

**Decision Notice
and
Finding Of No Significant Impact**

District Office & Work Center Complex Construction
AND
Forest Plan Amendment to Reallocate Land to Management Areas

Sabine Ranger District-Sabine National Forest-U.S. Department of Agriculture
Compartment 75
Sabine County, Texas
September, 2002

DECISION AND REASONS FOR THE DECISION

An Environmental Assessment (EA) is available for public review at the Sabine Ranger District Office in Hemphill, Texas. This document discusses the effects of the proposed district office and work center complex construction and associated utilities, parking, access roads, landscaping, picnic area, public restroom, trail, helispot, and other related activities in Compartment 75 on the Sabine National Forest, Sabine County, Texas.

Based on the analysis documented in the EA, I have decided to implement Alternative 2 as described in the EA (pages 6-7). This alternative would provide safe and adequate administrative facilities for all district personnel, be more accessible and visible to the public, and provide greater opportunities for interaction with the visiting public.

Alternative 2 discusses the following actions:

Construction of a district office and work center complex with paved access to State Highway 21 utilizing Forest Service Road (FSR) 192. Construction of access roads (approximately 0.6 miles to the office with an additional 0.4 miles to the work center) to remove timber from the construction areas.

A 30-foot wide utility corridor would be established for electric, telephone, water and computer services. Electric and phone access would be supplied from the existing utilities on the south side of State Highway 21 or from Farm to Market (FM) 242. Potable water would be obtained from the G-M Water Supply Corporation. A wastewater system would need to be installed. Parking areas would be provided for Forest Service vehicles, employees and the public.

Construction of a permanent helispot to provide a centralized location within the district and to provide a secure location for over-nighting the helicopter. This area is also located within five miles of Indian Mounds Wilderness Area.

Forest Service Road 192, a ½-mile long single-lane road with aggregate surfacing, would be upgraded to a two-lane road with asphalt surfacing to provide safe access to the new facilities. The entire length of FSR 192 would be reconstructed. About 0.3 mile from the intersection of FSR 192 and Highway 21 a new road will be constructed from FSR 192 to the east to provide access to new office site. This road will also be a two-lane asphalt-surfaced road. FSR 192 will be extended another 0.1 mile from its current ending point to provide access to the new work center site. The extension of FSR 192 will also be a two-lane asphalt surfaced road. The road construction will require fill dirt. Fill dirt will be obtained from the area adjacent to an existing borrow pit just east of FSR 192 (approximately 2 acres, not to be part of MA-10a).

The US Forest Service would request that the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) include a turning lane to access the District Office on State Highway 21.

Allocations to Management Area 10a for Administrative Sites – The 1996 Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas (the Plan) delineates approximately 129 acres throughout the Forests and Grasslands for administrative facilities. The Plan allocated approximately 218,000 acres to Upland Forest Ecosystems (MA-1) and 49,800 acres to Streamside Management Zones (MA-4). The reduction of approximately 25 acres from MA-1 and MA-4 represents less than 0.01 percent of the landbase allocated across the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas. This action would result in a non-significant amendment to the Plan.

Site preparation would begin in fiscal year 2002. Office construction would begin in fiscal year 2003.

Specific mitigation measures that apply are found in Chapter IV of the Plan and the Record of Decision Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS), Vegetation Management in the Coastal Plains/ Piedmont (ROD, Veg. Mgmt.). The following is a summary of the mitigating measures that apply to the issues and concerns raised during scoping.

1. Inventory, identify, protect and manage habitat for proposed endangered, threatened, sensitive species and exemplary plant communities. (FW-025, Pg 55)
2. Inventories of cultural resources and consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) will be completed for all projects, which involve a decision to implement ground disturbing activities. (FW-041, Pg 60)
3. Evaluate cultural resources located within a project's area of potential effect, and nominate those, which qualify to the National Register. (FW-042, Pg 60 and MA-10a-01, Pg 278)
4. If archeological or historic resources are encountered during soil disturbing activities, work stops until an archeologist evaluates the site's significance and completes any necessary consultation with SHPO. (FW-043, Pg 61)

5. Develop the Forest Road System, as needed, to respond to resource and travel management objectives while providing for the appropriate movement of people and products to and through National Forest System lands. (FW-051, Pg 61)
6. Establish and maintain vegetative cover on slopes and areas outside the driving surface or trail head that were disturbed during road and trail construction and reconstruction activities. (FW-052, Pg 61)
7. Design and construct roads and trails to minimize siltation and maintained to provide surface water drainage away from streams and into vegetated buffer strips or other filtering system. (FW-053, Pg 61)
8. Follow Scenic Resource Standards according to FSH and FSM guidelines for road location planning. (FW-054, Pg 61)
9. Include scenic resource assessment and recommendations during project analysis for proposed actions. (FW-185, Pg 75)
10. Maintain soil erosion with tolerance levels for that soil type and minimize increases in stream turbidity, and meet non-point source pollution goals and aquatic habitat objectives. (FW-211, Pg 82)
11. Design roads according to Best Management Practices (BMP's). Implementation of construction and maintenance conforms to BMP's to meet State Water Quality Standards. (FW-214, Pg 82)
12. Identify ephemeral streamcourses during site-specific analysis and determine the need to provide additional protection. (FW-218, Pg 83)
13. Limit new road construction only to stream crossings or recreational facilities except where valid existing rights would allow. Stream crossings should be constructed at right angles to the stream or riparian areas. (MA-4-22, Pg 154)
14. Require appropriate structures at all designated trails, permanent and temporary road system stream crossings. (MA-4-24, Pg 154)
15. Construction of physical structures within stream channels will be designed and engineered. (MA-4-26, Pg 154)
16. Roads and trails will be constructed and maintained as per section 404 of the Clean Water Act. (MA-4-27, Pg 155)
17. Fire response is immediate control for sites and the areas adjacent to the facilities. Prescribed fire may be used if fuel loadings present a hazard to facilities, employees or surrounding areas. (MA-10a-11, Pg 278)

18. Vegetation manipulation, including the use of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) approved pesticides, may be permitted to prevent tree mortality and reduce hazard. (MA-10a-21, Pg 278)
19. Insect control will be permitted using EPA approved pesticides. (MA-10a-22, Pg 278)
20. Project analysis, in accordance with current Forest Service standards shall be completed on all proposed facility projects. (MA-10a-41, Pg 279)
21. Designs for proposed administrative facility projects shall include an economic analysis, fire and safety considerations, accessibility requirements, building code compliance and civil rights impact analysis. (MA-10a-42, Pg 279)
22. Facilities will take into consideration the management goals for the areas adjacent to those facilities. (MA-10a-43, Pg 279)
23. The recreation opportunity spectrum (ROS) class for administrative sites is rural. (MA-10a-71, Pg 279)
24. All design and implementation practices should meet high quality landscape design and architectural standards, and be adapted to the site. No visual quality objectives (VQO's) assigned to this management area. (MA-10a-81, Pg 280)
25. Landscape plans shall be prepared for each administrative site. (MA-10a-82, Pg 280)
26. Vegetation removal shall be limited to protection of area values, health and safety, and the preparation of the site for rehabilitation or future development. (MA-10a-92, Pg 280)
27. Restore all eroding areas to improve water quality to eliminate hazards to the facilities, employees, or its visitors. (MA-10a-101, Pg 280)
28. Prompt revegetation is done if treatment leaves insufficient ground cover to control erosion by the end of the first growing season. (ROD, Veg. Mgmt. FEIS, Pg A-3)
29. If, during project implementation, previously undocumented RCW or bald eagle nesting activity is discovered, work will stop and the District Wildlife Biologist will be notified immediately so that appropriate Forest Service management actions can be implemented. (EA, Pg. 27)
30. All measures will be used at stream crossings to prevent siltation and erosion to protect fish, crustaceans, and mollusks. (EA, Pg. 27)

Alternative 2 and its mitigation measures were selected because:

- It will appropriately protect soil, water, air and wildlife resources while providing for an adequate office site (EA, p. 10-27).

- Customer service would be improved since areas and facilities would provide “universal access” to all customers and employees (EA, p. 30-32).
- A central office location will be more convenient and easy to access from a highly traveled State Highway (EA, p. 30-32).
- Although the office would not be visible to the public from the highway, it would create an “in the woods” feeling for forest visitors (EA, p. 14, 31).
- Over 4 times more space than at the Hemphill Office would be available for a public reception and resource interpretation area (EA, p. 14, 31).
- A conference room at the office building would also be provided that can accommodate visitor, interdisciplinary and safety meetings (EA, p. 31).
- There would be a reduction in fixed costs of leasing office space (EA, p. 24, 31).
- Improved computer access at the work center would be provided (EA, p. 31).
- All employees would have a change in duty station to the new office and work center at Pendleton Harbor (EA, p. 31).
- Having all employees in a centralized office and work center setting will provide for better coordination between staff and technicians, provide for a team atmosphere, improve the district’s ability to meet and save time, and would reduce the barriers between functions (EA, p. 31).
- Health risks would be reduced, such as allergies and septic problems (EA, p. 31).
- There is potential for a short-term increase in local employment of laborers, contractors and those that may provide service to contractors or groups that are constructing the facilities (EA, p. 31).

There are some unfavorable impacts to the Proposed Action, but the favorable impacts appear to outweigh the unfavorable. Some of the unfavorable impacts include:

- There will be a longer commute to work for most employees.
- Longer response time for emergency situations due to location.
- Increase in use of annual/sick leave because of distance from home.
- Lost personal time in travel and in the distance to health clubs/gyms for fire fighters to stay fit for arduous duty.
- Employees alienated from conveniences (i.e., restaurants, doctors, post office, shopping, etc.)
- All Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) employees will have a longer commute and some will not be able to afford to travel to the new complex.

Mitigations measures that can alleviate unfavorable impacts:

- Utilizing the Maxi-flex schedule (or work four, ten-hour days).
- Carpooling.
- Compensating the SCSEP by helping with additional transportation costs.
- Building a workout facility in the new office and work center complex to assist in employee fitness.
- Constructing a walking/running path within the complex to assist fire fighters with meeting the arduous requirements.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

In addition to Alternative 2, one other alternative was considered in detail and is summarized below.

Alternative 1 - (No Action) No new activities would be implemented with this proposal. The existing arrangement of offices and work centers would continue to be used.

Alternatives Considered But Eliminated From Detail Study

C75 – Various Locations along SH 21 - These alternatives were considered as potential office locations: (1) on the north side of SH 21 across from FSR 192, (2) on the south side of SH 21 close to FSR 192, (3) on the south side of SH 21 at the FM 3121 intersection, north of SH 242, and (4) next to the Super 8 Motel in Pendelton Harbor, TX (this site is noted as being in Compartment 73 in the Feasibility Report). These alternatives were eliminated from detailed study because the Forest Service lands adjacent to these roads are subject to local flooding, a gas pipeline, overhead power transmission lines and station, insufficient acreage for development, close proximity to SH 21 would impair the aesthetics, and noise from traffic on SH 21 would be distracting.

C-76 - This alternative considered office locations along SH 21 within Compartment 76. This alternative was eliminated from detailed study because construction space would be either very limited and/or locations too steep, and additional right-of-ways (ROW) would be needed to provide for safe deceleration and turning lanes.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

A letter inviting comments on the Proposed Action was sent to interested and affected agencies, organizations, and individuals on April 27, 2001. Three responses were received during the initial scoping for this project. This project was listed in the Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) for the third quarter of Fiscal Year 2001 (Project 07-01-005), which was mailed to interested publics and news media contacts on March 30, 2001. A copy of the draft EA and a letter requesting additional comments were mailed out on February 6, 2002. A legal notice initiating the 30-day comment period was published in the Light and Champion on February 8, 2002. No responses were received commenting on the EA.

Based on the results of comments received from the public, internal scoping and similar past actions, the Interdisciplinary Team (ID Team) identified the following issues to be addressed in the EA:

1. Working Conditions –An economical and modern administrative office is needed for all employees of the Sabine Ranger District. Measures used to compare alternatives included:

- The need for all employees to be located in one office site.

- The health and safety issues with current facilities.
- The size of the parking area at the current office is too small for employee vehicles, government fleet, and visitors.

2. Public/Customer Service - The office needs to be accessible to the public. Measures used to compare alternatives included:

- Ensuring the American Disabilities Act standards are met.
- The size of the current public reception area is too small to provide adequate customer service in a comfortable environment.
- The size of the parking area at the current office is too small for employee vehicles, government fleet, and visitors.

3. Heritage Resources – Ensuring that known cultural sites are not adversely affected.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

The EA contains sufficient information to verify that the decision to implement this project will not have a significant effect on the quality of the human environment. Consideration has been given to the following criteria (40 CFR 1508.27):

Context:

Based on the analysis contained in the EA (pp. 10-24), the biological and physical effects of the action are confined to the area in which they occur.

Intensity/Severity of the Impact:

1. Considering both beneficial and adverse impacts, there will be no significant effects as a result of the project (EA, pp. 10-27).
2. Public health and safety are minimally affected by the proposed action (EA, p. 30-32).
3. Unique geographic characteristics such as wetlands and floodplains near the planned actions are not significantly affected (EA, pp. 10-13).
4. Based on public participation, the effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial. This refers to controversy over the effects as presented in the Environmental Assessment (EA, pp. 5-10).
5. The possible effects on the human environment are not highly uncertain and do not involve unique or unknown risks. This proposal includes office site development practices that are commonly used and have been successful on the National Forests and Grasslands in Texas (EA, pp. 10-27).
6. These actions do not set a precedent for other projects that may be implemented to meet the goals and objective of the Plan (EA, p. 4).
7. There are no known significant cumulative effects between this project and other projects implemented or planned on areas separated from the affected area of this project beyond those evaluated in Chapter IV of the FEIS for the Plan (EA, pp. 10-27).

8. There will be no significant negative effects to any heritage resources listed in or eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historical Places (EA, pp. 15).
9. Proposed, endangered, and threatened species are "not likely to be adversely affected" and "may impact individuals of one or more of the Regional Forester's sensitive species, but is not likely to result in a trend toward federal listing or a loss of viability" (EA, pp. 16-27, Appendix D).
10. The actions do not threaten a violation of Federal, State, or local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment (EA, pp. 10-27).

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS AND REGULATIONS

1. The practices in Alternative 2 are consistent with the Plan. The project will result in the reallocation of 25 acres surrounding the selected site from MA-1 and MA-4 to MA-10a (Administrative Use Site, the Plan, pp. 277-280). Actions are consistent with the management prescriptions and practices for this Management Area.
2. Required mitigation measures are fully incorporated into Alternative 2, ensuring consistency with the Plan and Record of Decision (ROD) and FEIS for Vegetation Management in the Coastal Plain/Piedmont. The project is feasible and reasonable, and results in applying management practices to meet the Plan's direction of protecting the environment while producing goods and services.
3. Water, soil productivity, air quality and visual quality will be maintained in the project area. For water quality management, State BMPs (p. 11-13) will be used for this project. These BMPs are from the State Water Quality Management Plan, and have been designed with the goal of producing water that meets State Water Quality Standards. The project will be monitored to ensure BMPs are implemented. If implementing BMPs on a specific site results in effects significantly higher than anticipated, appropriate corrective measures will be analyzed and implemented. This project will fully comply with State approved BMPs and the Clean Water Act [40 CFR 1508.27 (b)(10)].
4. The actions of this project are in accordance with the Plan which provides for removing vegetation, including timber, to protect the area values, health and safety, and prepare the site for development. (MA-10a-92, the Plan, p. 280)
5. The actions of this project which alter vegetation comply with the seven requirements of 36 CFR 219.27 (b) by following the Forest Wide Standards and Guidelines (S&Gs), the S&Gs for Management Area 10a, plus mitigation measures and management requirements in the ROD & FEIS for Vegetation Management in the Coastal Plain/Piedmonts.
6. These actions are consistent with Section V-B1 of the Southern Regional Programmatic Agreement and the Memorandum of Understanding between the Texas State Historical Commission and the U.S. Forest Service, dated September 28, 1995.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215.7. A written Notice of Appeal must be postmarked or received within 45 days after the date this notice is published in the Lufkin Daily News, Lufkin, Texas. The Notice of Appeal should be sent to, USDA, Forest Service, Southern

Region, ATTN: Appeals Deciding Officer, 1720 Peachtree Road N.W., Suite 811N, Atlanta, Georgia, 30309.

Appeals must meet content requirements of 36 CFR 215.14. For additional information on this decision, contact Marcus Beard by telephone at (409) 787-3870, toll free at 1-866-235-1750, or PO Box 227, Hemphill, Texas 75948.

If no appeal is received, implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of appeal disposition.

For additional information concerning this decision or the Forest Service appeal process, contact Glenn Donnahoe, 701 N. First St., Lufkin, Texas 75901, or telephone: (936) 639-8504.



GLENN DONNAHOE
Acting Forest Supervisor

9/24/2002
Date