

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
SITE-SPECIFIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT OF THE
100-ACRE SUPPLEMENT EXPANSION PROJECT AT THE
FLORIDA NATIONAL CEMETERY, BUSHNELL, SUMTER COUNTY, FLORIDA

Introduction

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), National Cemetery Administration (NCA), prepared a Final Site-Specific Environmental Assessment (SEA), included in its entirety herein by reference, to identify, analyze, and document the potential physical, environmental, cultural, and socioeconomic impacts associated with the Proposed Action to construct and operate a cemetery expansion of an approximately 100-acre area within the existing boundary of the Florida National Cemetery (FNC) located at 6502 SW 102nd Avenue, Bushnell, Sumter County, Florida. The majority of the 100-acre area is undeveloped, except for an approximately 4-acre area that FNC staff use for stockpiling excess soils and woody debris, a gravestone carving shop, and three temporary storage containers. The 100-acre area also includes Sand Pond, an approximately 10-acre naturally occurring surface water body that also receives excess stormwater run-off from adjacent developed portions of FNC. Under the Proposed Action, the expansion would entirely avoid Sand Pond and its peripheral wetlands, plus a 25-foot buffer extending upland from the seasonal high-water line. The remainder of the area would be cleared, graded, and developed as a National Shrine with landscaped grounds including in-ground burials and above-ground columbaria, roadways connected to the rest of FNC, professional landscaping with forested buffers, and irrigation and drainage systems. The Proposed Action would therefore extend the longevity of FNC for at least 20-30 years, depending on burial rates and type of interments available. VA would complete a new design plan for the development of this area prior to construction.

VA prepared the SEA according to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 ([NEPA]; 42 United States Code [USC] 4321 et seq.), the President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] Parts 1500-1508), and VA's NEPA implementing regulations, 38 CFR Part 26 (*Environmental Effects of the Department of Veterans Affairs Actions*). The SEA also tiers to and incorporates by reference the findings from the VA's 1983 Final Environmental Impact Statement for the initial siting, construction, and operation of the FNC.

Background

NCA is responsible for providing cemetery services for veterans and other eligible persons pursuant to the provisions of the *National Cemeteries Act of 1973* and other statutory authority and regulations. Under this mandate, NCA is responsible for the operation and maintenance of existing national cemeteries and the construction of new national cemeteries.

In 1980, VA completed an EIS for the site selection and future development of an approximately 400-acre property that is now the FNC. The initial phased of construction began in 1986, and the first interments occurred in 1988. By 1999, VA determined the original capacity of the FNC would be reached by 2006, approximately 20 years sooner than planned. In response, VA in 1999 expanded the cemetery by purchasing an approximately 137-acre parcel adjacent to the west of the original cemetery boundary. A conservation easement with the State of Florida prohibits development on approximately 25 acres of the 137-acre tract, leaving 112 acres available for development. VA has since developed or is in the process of constructing new burial areas within the 112-acre area.

These recent expansion projects are anticipated to provide approximately 15-30 years of burial capacity at FNC. VA recognizes, however, gravesite depletion will continue and future expansions will be necessary to further extend the longevity of FNC. VA gives preference for potential future expansion

phases on grounds within the current FNC property boundary. Thus, as part of the longer-term planning to extend the longevity of FNC, VA identified the 100-acre area as having high potential for development. VA reached this conclusion after completing a series of site-specific physical, environmental, and cultural investigations to identify any site-specific constraints and conditions that will be considered in subsequent master planning design, construction, and operation.

Purpose and Need

The *purpose* of the Proposed Action is to enable NCA to continue providing interment benefits to eligible Veterans and their families by further extending the longevity of FNC.

Due to gravesite depletion, the Proposed Action is *needed* to allow NCA to continue meeting its goal of providing eligible Veterans with reasonable access to VA burial options in central Florida.

Description of Proposed Action and Alternatives

Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, the expansion would occur within the approximately 100-acre undeveloped area located within the northeastern portion of FNC (Figure 2). Approximately 85 acres would be developed, while approximately 15 acres associated with Sand Pond and its peripheral wetlands, plus a 25-foot buffer extending upland from the seasonal high-water line, would remain undeveloped. Forested buffers are included in the development elements. The specific burial capacity of the future expansion would be specified in a master plan/engineering design document which would be completed prior to development. However, based on similar expansion projects at FNC and other National Cemeteries, the expansion would include the following general elements.

- Columbarium – Columbarium sites would be graded and have multiple sections of niches 4 to 5 inches high (approximately 7-8 feet high) with a border of landscaped grounds and existing forest. Columbarium capacity would be determined in an engineering design document which would be completed prior to development.
- In-Ground Cremains – Sites would be graded and separated from other interment areas using landscaped vegetation. Capacity would be determined in an engineering design document which would be completed prior to development.
- Pre-Placed Crypts – Crypt sections would be graded and constructed according to the engineering design document. Each crypt section would be landscaped with grass and decorative shrubs. Capacity would be determined in an engineering design document which would be completed prior to development.
- Roadways and Parking – New roadways would be constructed to extend access from existing roadways to the new interment area. Visitors would be allowed to park on the roadway shoulders but off the grass.
- Landscaping/Irrigation – The expansion area would be landscaped in a manner consistent with the overall cemetery appearance, for visual aesthetics, and to provide privacy. Planted vegetation would include shrubs (ex. *Loropetalums cultivars*), trees (ex. Crepe Myrtle), and turf (ex. St. Augustine grass), which are currently planted at FNC. Irrigation water would be supplied from a combination of existing and/or new groundwater wells at FNC and the existing surface water irrigation pond located in the southern portion of FNC.

The following bullets summarize major design elements incorporated into the Proposed Action that are protective of the natural environment.

- *Avoidance of Environmentally Sensitive Areas*. Approximately 15 acres associated with Sand Pond and its peripheral wetlands, plus a 25-foot buffer extending upland from the seasonal high-water line, would remain undeveloped. FEMA-designated floodplains would be avoided to the extent practicable. Where floodplains cannot be avoided, the development design would incorporate compensatory storage and grading above the base flood elevation.

- *Avoidance and Protection of Listed Species.* Prior to construction, VA would conduct surveys for gopher tortoises (*Gopherus polyphemus*) and eastern indigo snakes (*Drymarchon couperi*); if present, individual animals would be relocated to an approved off-site recipient location under a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation permit.
- *Stormwater Management.* The Proposed Action would create new impervious surfaces, primarily from new roadways. The development would be graded to direct stormwater away from burial areas, but only minor slopes would be created to minimize flows that can cause erosion and sedimentation of run-off. Additionally, VA would comply to the maximum extent technically feasible with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (USEPA) Technical Guidance on Implementing the Stormwater Run-off Requirements for Federal Projects under Section 438 of the *Energy Independence and Security Act* (EISA) (USEPA, 2009). Under EISA, VA would reduce stormwater run-off by using a variety of stormwater management practices often referred to as "green infrastructure" or "low impact development" practices, including, for example, reducing impervious surfaces and utilizing porous pavements.
- *Utility Requirements – Irrigation Water Supply.* Irrigation water would be obtained from a combination of existing the groundwater supply wells and the establish surface water pond that are currently used to supply irrigation water throughout FNC. As needed, a new groundwater supply well may be installed within FNC in the future. The specific volume of irrigation water would be determined once the landscaped area acreage is defined as part of the master plan/engineering design. VA would obtain a permit to install and operate a new groundwater supply well from the Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) and a modification of the existing Water Use Permit modification (SWFWMD Application 20008675-006, dated July 1, 2018) to withdraw additional volume from the existing surface water pond. Measures to increase irrigation water efficiency would also be developed and implemented per the permit and VA's standard operating procedures.

No Action Alternative

The No Action alternative serves as a benchmark against which the effects of the Proposed Action can be evaluated, as required under the CEQ Regulations (40 CFR Part 1502.14). For this project, No Action is defined as not implementing the Proposed Action.

The No Action alternative would challenge NCA's goal of continuing to provide eligible Veterans and their family members with reasonable access to VA burial options in central Florida and, therefore, would not meet the purpose and need for action.

Under the No Action alternative, long-term, reasonable access to burial benefits would not be provided to the estimated 470,000 Veterans living in central Florida and their families. These Veterans and their families seeking interment at a National Cemetery would be required to travel to the nearest National Cemetery, which is the Sarasota National Cemetery located approximately 110 miles to the south of FNC; the Cape Canaveral National Cemetery located approximately 120 miles to the east in Titusville, Florida; the Jacksonville National Cemetery located approximately 170 miles to the northeast; the Tallahassee National Cemetery located approximately 225 miles to the northwest; and the South Florida National Cemetery located in Lake Worth, Florida, approximately 250 miles to the southeast of FNC.

Furthermore, the No Action alternative would create hardships for the survivors of deceased veterans who wish to attend funerals and grave visitations at a National Cemetery located outside of central Florida, due to the longer distances between their homes and the burial sites outside of this region. If Veterans and their families must resort to private burials, they are deprived of the honor and privilege bestowed upon them by a grateful nation for their service to their country.

Environmental Analysis

As documented in the SEA, the VA concludes that no significant adverse impacts, considered individually or cumulatively, would result from implementing the Proposed Action. Construction activities associated with the Proposed Action would occur over an approximately 30-month period and include land clearing, grading, extension of irrigation utilities, road paving, and installation of pre-placed crypts and columbarium. Where the construction activities cannot entirely avoid impacting environmental resources, the Proposed Action incorporates measures to minimize these impacts to less-than-significant adverse levels to resources including: aesthetics, air quality, cultural resources associated with inadvertent discovery, topography, soil, groundwater, wildlife and habitat, noise, solid waste volumes (excess soil and vegetation), and the irrigation utility. With the exception of impacts to wildlife and habitat and irrigation, adverse impacts to other resources would end once construction is completed. The loss of approximately 85 acres of forest habitat would have a long-term, less-than-significant adverse impact on common flora and fauna; no federally listed flora were present. Potential adverse impacts to the state-listed gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) and federally-listed eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon couperi*) would be minimized to less-than-significant levels through avoidance and relocation of individual animals prior to the start of construction activities. Construction would have a short-term, less-than-significant beneficial impact on socioeconomics as a result of purchasing construction materials from local and regional vendors when practical.

Under the Proposed Action, existing VA staff would professionally operate and maintain the new expansion areas and infrastructure. Maintenance would involve irrigation and mowing of newly landscaped areas, cleaning memorial monuments, and solid waste collection (primarily discarded flowers). The noise from these activities would have a less-than-significant impact on visitors; the noise levels and short-term durations would be similar to operational noises currently generated at the cemetery and experienced by visitors. Potential impacts to soil quality associated with excavations for individual burial sites would be maintained at less-than-significant adverse levels by minimizing the generation of excess soils, limiting the area of exposed soils, and revegetating exposed soils with native, non-invasive vegetation. Operation of the Proposed Action would have a long-term, significant beneficial impact on community services by providing new burial sites to Veterans and their families. Extending the longevity of FNC would also have a long-term, beneficial impact on socioeconomics by lessening costs for visitors who reside in central Florida and travel to and from FNC. Additionally, implementing the Proposed Action would not generate substantial public controversy.

Under the Proposed Action, VA would implement management, avoidance, and regulatory compliance measures to minimize impacts to the aforementioned environmental resources at less-than-significant adverse levels as described in the SEA and summarized in the attached table (included as Appendix A in this FONSI).

Agency and Public Comment

As part of the NEPA process, VA contacted selected state and Native American Tribes to inform them of the Proposed Action and the opportunity to provide input on the Draft SEA. Input from these organizations was incorporated in the Draft SEA. Once the Draft SEA was published, VA provided these and other federal, state, and local agencies with a Notice of Availability (NOA) to inform them of the availability of the Draft SEA and the opportunity to comment on the document during a 30-day review period. Additionally, a NOA announcing the availability of the Draft SEA was published in the *Village Daily Sun* on March 11 and 15, 2020, and marked the start of the 30-day public review period, which ended April 15, 2020. On April 24, 2020, the Florida State Clearinghouse informed VA that the Proposed Action could proceed without further review. On December 11, 2019, the Seminole Tribe of Florida informed the VA they had no objections to the Proposed Action, but requested additional information about prior cultural resource investigations at FNC. The Seminole Tribe of Florida did not have any further comment after receiving the requested information from VA on December 19, 2019. No comments were received from other agencies or the public during the Draft SEA 30-day review period. Accordingly, no substantive changes to the Draft SEA were required to prepare the Final SEA.

Finding of No Significant Impact

As a result of the analysis of impacts in the SEA, summarized and incorporated in its entirety by reference herein, it is the conclusion of VA that, with the implementation of appropriate management, avoidance, and regulatory compliance measures included herein as Appendix A, the Proposed Action would not generate significant public controversy and would cause no significant impacts of an adverse nature on the quality of the natural or human environment within the meaning of Section 102(2)(c) of the NEPA. Therefore, per the NEPA, the CEQ regulations, and 38 CFR Part 26, I am signing this FONSI, and preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement for the Proposed Action is not required.

Stephan J Frank 1047206 Digitally signed by Stephan J Frank
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Director
VA National Cemetery Administration

Date

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Fernando L. Fernández, REM
Environmental Officer
VA Construction and Facilities Management Office

Date

APPENDIX A

Best Management Practices, Environmental Avoidance and Protection Measures, and Regulatory Compliance Measures Incorporated into the Proposed Action

<i>AESTHETICS</i>
Construction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Control fugitive dust emissions through routine construction BMPs, including using water trucks to prevent dust emissions and gravel-covered access roads to remove dirt from the tires of vehicles leaving the construction area in the Proposed Action site. Erect temporary privacy fence and screening around the construction zone and maintain the existing vegetative buffers around the perimeter of the Project Study Area. Erect temporary privacy fencing during construction in the Project Study Area along areas visible from the highway.
Operation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Routine and scheduled professional landscape maintenance to ensure the upkeep of the park-like appearance of the grounds and associated physical infrastructure (roads, interment area).
<i>AIR QUALITY</i>
Construction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement dust suppression methods to include application of water, construction scheduling, and maintaining limited and decreased on-site vehicle speed limits. Stabilize exposed soil with vegetation or mulching to minimize erosion and subsequent dust generation. Construction vehicles will travel on paved roads within FNC and vicinity at speeds at or below posted limits. This will minimize dust generated by vehicles and equipment on paved surfaces. On unpaved surfaces at the site, vehicle speeds will be maintained at or below 5 miles per hour to prevent dust generation of exposed soil. Haul trucks transporting soil will be covered with haul tarps. Visually monitor all construction activities on a daily basis, and particularly during extended periods of dry weather; implement additional dust control measures as needed.
<i>CULTURAL RESOURCES</i>
Construction and Operation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implement an “Inadvertent Discovery” plan: If prehistoric or historic artifacts that could be associated with Native American, early European, or American settlement are encountered at any time within the project site area, VA will cease all activities involving subsurface disturbance in the vicinity of the discovery. The Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources, Compliance Review Section and Federally-recognized Native American Tribes in the region, who may attach religious or cultural significance to the property affected by the Proposed Action will be contacted, and project activities will not resume without verbal and/or written authorization. In the event that unmarked human remains are encountered during permitted activities, all work will stop immediately, and the proper authorities will be notified in accordance with Section 872.05, <i>Florida Statutes</i>.
<i>GEOLOGY, SOILS, AND TOPOGRAPHY</i>
Construction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design the expansion area to comply with EISA 438 to the maximum extent technically feasible through engineering and design controls, such as minimizing the creation of new impervious surfaces, directing stormwater run-off to retention basins, and allowing precipitation to infiltrate into the ground surface to the maximum extent possible. Ensure the design is also consistent with Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD)

<p>requirement that the post-development site conditions have a combined site and soil stormwater storage equivalent to the pre-development condition.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a soil erosion and sediment control (SESC) plan as part of the SWFWMD ERP.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Per an approved ERP, install and maintain sedimentation and erosion control measures, including the use of silt fencing, synthetic hay bales, specified loading and unloading area, covering exposed soils during anticipated storm events, and revegetating soils with temporary and/or permanent non-invasive vegetation as soon as construction conditions allow.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement measures to prevent dust emissions from disturbed soil and on construction vehicles leaving and entering the Project Study Area
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revegetate disturbed area as soon as construction is completed. Use native, non-invasive vegetation. Professionally maintain vegetation during operation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply for and adhere to the terms of the FDEP National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) General Permit for Construction Activity, and the SWFWMD ERP.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain spill kits to rapidly respond to and limit impacts from accidental releases of equipment fluids or chemicals. Report releases of regulated quantities of regulated chemicals to VA and FDEP. Perform cleanup according to applicable regulatory requirements.
<p>Operation</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct routine landscaping to ensure soil remains vegetated and stabilized to prevent erosion.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporarily stockpile excavated soil for individual burial sites and return to the burial site from which it was obtained. Sod new burial site to prevent erosion.
<p>HYDROLOGY AND WATER QUALITY</p>
<p>Construction and Operation</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement the BMPs listed above for Geology, Soils, and Topography.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize native, non-invasive, drought-resistant vegetation for area landscaping to reduce irrigation requirements.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Route stormwater run-off from impervious surfaces to designated stormwater retention and drainage area.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement spill and leak prevention and response procedures, including maintaining a complete spill kit at the project area, to reduce the impacts of incidental releases of vehicle fluids to groundwater quality.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and operate the irrigation system to maximize efficiency and conserve water resources in accordance with VA’s design guidelines and SOPs and in accordance with the existing SWFWMD Consumptive Water Use Permit and any subsequent modifications.
<p>HABITAT AND WILDLIFE</p>
<p>Construction</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey suitable habitat within the proposed expansion area within the Project Study Area prior to construction, as listed below.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In order to reduce the effect, the Proposed Action may have on the eastern indigo snake, VA would incorporate the Standard Protection Measures for the Eastern Indigo Snake in their construction plans, in addition to excavating all possible underground refugia (i.e., gopher tortoise burrows) prior to commencing construction. Coordinate with the USFWS on concurrence prior to initiating construction.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct 15% and 100% surveys for gopher tortoise burrows according to FWC requirements prior to any clearing and earthwork.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior to construction of the proposed expansion, conduct surveys for the presence of the Southeastern American kestrel. Coordinate with the FWC if any Southeastern American kestrel nests are observed.

Operation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Utilize native, non-invasive, drought-resistant vegetation for area landscaping to reduce irrigation requirements. Lawn area will primarily be seeded or sodded with St. Augustine grass, while perimeter shrubs and trees will include <i>Loropetalum</i> cultivars and Crepe Myrtle.
NOISE
Construction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schedule construction activities to minimize impacts to interment ceremonies to the extent possible unless there is a specific activity that would directly impact the current operation of the cemetery, in which case schedule the activity outside of the normal construction schedule. Equip construction equipment with noise dampening equipment (mufflers, noise shields) and turn equipment off when not in use. Comply with OSHA requirements to protect workers' hearing around loud equipment.
FLOODPLAINS, WETLANDS AND COASTAL ZONE MANAGEMENT
Construction and Operation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure any future improvements are above the 100-year floodplain base elevation. Implement BMPs specified for Soils.
SOLID WASTE AND HAZARDOUS MATERIALS
Construction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reutilize excavated soils on-site in accordance with site design specifications. Utilize excess soils off-site. Recycle excess construction materials off-site. Manage solid and hazardous waste according to VA's solid and hazardous materials SOPs and management measures specified in NCA Master Construction Specifications, and applicable Federal and state laws. Implement management measures for incidental releases specified under Soils.
Operation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manage solid wastes in designated area and establish routine pickup and disposal to appropriate landfill facilities by qualified vendors, consistent with current practices to maintain the National Shrine aesthetics at FNC. Apply pesticides/herbicides according to label instructions by licensed applicators.
TRANSPORTATION AND PARKING
Construction
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Construction vehicles will use the existing maintenance road (along CR 476B) to enter and exit FNC. If required, flaggers will be utilized to notify oncoming traffic of slower construction vehicles entering or exiting CR 476B from the maintenance road. Stage construction equipment at the site to ensure construction equipment is not readily visible to visitors and maintains the solemnity of FNC. Establish gravel area at the exit of construction area to remove dirt/soil from construction vehicle tires prior to entering the roadways within FNC.
UTILITIES
Operation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adhere to the current SWFWMD Consumptive Water Use Permit or subsequent modifications. Follow the water conservation management plan activities and groundwater water withdrawal limitations under the existing permit, and all requirements under a new permit for a new groundwater well.