FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
PROPOSED ALBUQUERQUE NATIONAL CEMETERY
BERNALILLO COUNTY, NEW MEXICO

Introduction

A Final Environmental Assessment (EA), included herein by reference, was prepared to identify, analyze, and document the potential physical, environmental, cultural, and socioeconomic impacts associated with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) Proposed Action to acquire approximately 230 acres of land near Albuquerque, New Mexico for the construction and operation of a new National Cemetery. The EA included the initial phase of cemetery development (approximately 40 to 60 acres). Supplemental NEPA analyses will be conducted for subsequent phases of cemetery development. The EA was prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 ([NEPA]; 42 United States Code 4321 *et seq*.), the President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 1500-1508), and *Environmental Effects of the Department of Veterans Affairs Actions* (38 CFR Part 26).

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to establish a new National Cemetery of sufficient size and capacity to serve the projected burial needs of Veterans in the central New Mexico area.

The proposed new National Cemetery is needed to address the depletion of National Cemetery burial space in central New Mexico. The existing Santa Fe National Cemetery (SFNC), located at 501 North Guadalupe Street in Santa Fe, New Mexico, is the only National Cemetery in central New Mexico and is nearing its burial capacity. The new cemetery would provide additional burial capacity, as well as improved cemetery access (reduced travel time), for central New Mexico Veterans and their families.

1. Description of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

Proposed Action

VA proposes to acquire approximately 230 acres of land located at the southwest corner of Shooting Range Access Road and Atrisco Vista Boulevard in an unincorporated area of Bernalillo County, New Mexico (Site) for the development and operation of a new National Cemetery. The new cemetery would provide burial facilities for Veterans and eligible family members in central New Mexico.

VA plans to acquire the land in 2023 and would begin the cemetery master planning and design approximately 6 months after acquisition. The master planning and design process is anticipated to require 2 years. VA would follow the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Facilities Design Guide in the proposed National Cemetery design. The cemetery would include a gated entrance and perimeter fencing, an administration and public information building, an assembly area, flagpoles, a memorial wall, committal shelters, a loop road through the cemetery, casket gravesites with markers, columbarium niches, and a maintenance building/facility. The cemetery would be developed in phases, with the first phase (approximately 40 to 60 acres) including the buildings and infrastructure needed to support the first 15 years of burial capacity. It is anticipated the first phase of cemetery development would be completed within 2 years of the completion of the cemetery design.

The proposed National Cemetery would be open to the public every day throughout the year. VA anticipates approximately 14 funeral processions per weekday at the cemetery, averaging approximately 10 cars per procession. VA estimates that the cemetery, once fully established, would receive approximately 170 vehicles per weekday (funeral processions, visitors, and staff).

Alternatives Considered

VA considered the expansion of SFNC; however, land contiguous to the SFNC was not available for reasonable acquisition. As a result, VA concluded that a new National Cemetery near Albuquerque, best suited the purpose and need to fully serve the burial needs of central New Mexico area Veterans, the majority of whom live in the Albuquerque area.

In 2017, VA published a Solicitation for Federal Business Opportunity (FBO), seeking offers for at least 200 acres of land suitable for cemetery development, located within a 15-mile radius of the Albuquerque. VA received several responses to this solicitation. Through a comprehensive screening process, VA identified two suitable sites in 2017 that best met the screening criteria. VA initiated due diligence activities and a NEPA EA for the acquisition of one of these two sites for the proposed National Cemetery. However, based on the findings of the initial due diligence investigations, the two prospective sites were either later eliminated from consideration and/or were withdrawn by their respective offerors.

In 2019, VA published a second Solicitation for FBO, seeking offers for at least 200 acres of land suitable for cemetery development, located within an 8-mile radius of the intersection of Interstate 25 and State Highway 556, northeast of Albuquerque toward Santa Fe. VA identified one offered site, an approximately 340-acre property located south of U.S. Highway 550 at its junction with Old State Route 44 in Rio Rancho, Sandoval County, that best met all of the established screening criteria. VA completed due diligence investigations and prepared an EA and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the Rio Rancho site in May 2021. However, the property acquisition process between the current owner (New Mexico State Land Office) and VA stalled and the process was terminated.

Consequently, VA reevaluated the originally considered prospective sites and determined the approximately 230 acres of land located at the southwest corner of Shooting Range Access Road and Atrisco Vista Boulevard in Bernalillo County best met the need for the new National Cemetery.

The Final EA examined in-depth two alternatives, the Proposed Action and the No Action Alternative.

Proposed Action

VA proposes to acquire approximately 230 acres of land, located at the southwest corner of Shooting Range Access Road and Atrisco Vista Boulevard in an unincorporated area of Bernalillo County, New Mexico and to develop it with a new National Cemetery. The Site is located in a rural but developing area in the north-central portion of Bernalillo County and south of the Double Eagle II Airport. The Site is currently undeveloped, generally level, pastureland. The majority of the Site would be developed with the proposed cemetery.

No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, the Proposed Action would not be implemented. NCA would continue to provide burial services at SFNC until the existing capacity is reached, after which the cemetery would be maintained and open for visitors but would be closed for new interments. Veterans and their families residing in central New Mexico would no longer be served by a proximate National Cemetery and would be required to travel a substantial distance for burial at a National Cemetery. The Site would likely remain undeveloped pastureland in the short term but could be developed for another use in the future.

2. Environmental Analysis

Environmental Consequences

Proposed Action

The Final EA concluded that the Proposed Action would result in potential short-term and/or long-term adverse impacts to aesthetics, air quality, geology and soils, hydrology and water quality, wildlife and habitat, noise, land use, solid waste and hazardous materials, transportation, and utilities. All of these potential impacts are less than significant and would be further reduced through careful implementation of the general best management practices (BMPs); management, minimization, and avoidance measures; and compliance with regulatory requirements, as identified in the Final EA.

The Proposed Action would enable VA to provide proximate National Cemetery burial benefits to the regional Veteran community after the existing SFNC interment space is depleted, a significant beneficial socioeconomic effect.

No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, the Proposed Action would not be implemented. No beneficial impacts attributable to the Proposed Action would occur. Veterans and their families residing in central New Mexico would continue to use the SFNC until space is no longer available. Once SFNC reaches capacity, Veterans and their families in the region would be required to travel much longer distances to the nearest National Cemetery for burial and subsequent visits, at increased cost and time.

Cumulative Impacts

The Final EA also examined the potential cumulative effects of implementing each of the considered alternatives. This analysis found that the Proposed Action, with the implementation of the BMPs; management, minimization, and avoidance measures; and regulatory compliance measures specified in the Final EA, would not result in significant adverse cumulative impacts to the human environment.

Management, Minimization and Mitigation Measures

VA will include the BMPs; management, minimization, and avoidance measures; and regulatory compliance measures summarized in Table 4-1 of the Final EA (attached herein as Appendix A) in the Proposed Action to minimize and maintain adverse effects at less-than-significant levels.

3. Regulations

The Proposed Action will be consistent with federal, state, and local environmental regulations, including those listed in Appendix A of the Final EA.

4. Commitment to Implementation

VA affirms its commitment to implement the BMPs; management, minimization, and avoidance measures; and regulatory compliance measures identified in the Final EA and this Finding of No Significant Impact.

5. Agency and Public Involvement

VA has consulted with appropriate federal, state, and local regulatory agencies, and federally recognized Native American Tribes identified as having possible ancestral ties to the Site area. This consultation is documented in the Final EA. Comments and input submitted by regulatory agencies and Tribes have been addressed in the Final EA.

VA published and distributed the Draft EA for a 30-day public comment period, as announced by a Notice of Availability (NOA) published in the Albuquerque Journal on December 28, 2022 and January 8, 2023. A copy of the Draft EA was made available for public review at the Central and Unser Library located at 8081 Central Avenue in Albuquerque and on the VA Office of Construction and Facilities Management Environmental Program website: (https://www.cfm.va.gov/environmental/index.asp). VA also emailed notification of the Draft EA for review and comment, with a link to the Draft EA on VA's website, to each of the government agencies and Tribes that were contacted during the NEPA scoping and Section 106 consultation. The Albuquerque-Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority provided comments on the Draft EA. These comments were considered and addressed in the Final EA, as appropriate. VA did not receive any additional government agency, Indian tribe, or public comments regarding the Draft EA.

6. Finding of No Significant Impact

After careful review of the Final EA, VA has concluded that the Proposed Action would not generate significant controversy or have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment, provided VA implements the BMPs; management, minimization, and avoidance measures; and regulatory compliance measures identified in Appendix A to this FONSI. VA will implement these measures.

This analysis fulfills the requirements of the NEPA and is consistent with the VA and CEQ regulations implementing the Act. An environmental impact statement is not required.

Bradley G Phillips 156860

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Bradley G. Phillips
Executive Director, NCA Pacific District
VA National Cemetery Administration

FERNANDO FERNANDEZ ORTIZ

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Fernando L. Fernández, REM
Environmental Engineer
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Management, Minimization, and Avoidance Measures Incorporated into the Proposed Action

Technical Resource Area	Measure
Aesthetics	Develop the cemetery in concert with the Site's natural topography preferencing low-lying design. Maintain some natural areas.
	Comply, to the extent practicable, with the development standards of the Bernalillo County Code of Ordinances (BCCO) during the cemetery design.
Air Quality	Use appropriate dust suppression methods (such as the use of water, dust palliative, covers, suspension of earth moving in high wind conditions) during onsite construction activities.
	Stabilize disturbed areas through re-vegetation or mulching if the areas would be inactive for several weeks or longer. Specific requirements would be identified with the Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP).
	Implement measures to reduce diesel particulate matter emissions from construction equipment, such as reducing idling time and using newer equipment with emissions controls.
	Comply with the applicable Albuquerque-Bernalillo County Air Quality Control Board regulations, including obtaining a fugitive dust permit for construction.
Cultural Resources and Historic Properties	Share cemetery design information with the National Park Service – Petroglyph National Monument and other interested consulting parties at the approximately 30%, 60% and 90% design stages for review and comment.
	Should potentially historic or culturally significant items be discovered during project construction, the construction contractor would immediately cease work until VA, appropriate Secretary of the Interior (SOI)-qualified professional(s), New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), Indian tribes and other consulting parties are contacted to properly identify, evaluate, and appropriately treat discovered items in accordance with applicable state and federal laws (e.g., 36 CFR § 800.13).
Geology, Topography, and Soils	Control soil erosion and sedimentation impacts during construction by implementing erosion prevention measures and complying with the USEPA National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Construction Stormwater General Permit permitting process. Implement effective controls per a site-specific SWPPP. The NPDES permit would require stormwater runoff and erosion management using BMPs, such as earth berms, vegetative buffers and filter strips, and spill prevention and management techniques. The construction contractor would implement the sedimentation and erosion control measures specified in the NPDES permit and the SWPPP to protect surface water quality.

Technical Resource Area	Measure
Hydrology and Water Quality	Control soil erosion and sedimentation impacts during construction by complying with the NPDES permit and the SWPPP.
	Comply with the Bernalillo County Municipal Separate Storm Sewer Systems (MS4) requirements and Bernalillo County Stormwater Ordinances, as applicable.
	Design improvements in accordance with the requirements of Energy Independence and Security Act Section 438 with respect to stormwater runoff quantity and characteristics.
	Ensure the cemetery design includes sufficient on-site stormwater management so as not to adversely affect the water quantity/quality in receiving waters and/or offsite areas.
	Obtain a New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) Ground Water Quality Bureau Underground Injection Control Class V Injection Well Permit, if applicable, based on the design of the cemetery stormwater management system.
	Use native, low-moisture tolerant species to the extent practicable to reduce the need for irrigation.
	Obtain approval and a permit from the New Mexico Office of the State Engineer (NMOSE) to install an on-site irrigation water well, if necessary.
Wildlife and Habitat	Conduct ground-disturbing construction activities associated with the cemetery development outside of the burrowing owl nesting season (April through October). If ground-disturbing activities cannot be conducted outside of the nesting season, a qualified biologist would need to survey the Site for active nests prior to construction in accordance with New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (NMDGF) burrowing owl survey protocol. Contact NMDGF and/or US Fish and Wildlife Service for recommendations for species relocation or avoidance if nesting owls are identified. Active nests must not be disturbed.
	Consult with NMDGF prior to construction to develop a plan to relocate or humanely remove prairie dogs that would be impacted by ground disturbing cemetery construction activities.
	Use native species to the extent practicable when re-vegetating land disturbed by construction to avoid the potential introduction of non-native or invasive species.

Technical Resource Area	Measure
Noise	Limit, to the extent possible, construction and associated heavy truck traffic to occur between 7:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. on Monday through Friday, or during normal, weekday, work hours.
	Locate stationary operating equipment as far away from sensitive receptors as possible.
	Shut down noise-generating heavy equipment when it is not needed.
	Maintain equipment per manufacturer's recommendations to minimize noise generation.
	Encourage construction personnel to operate equipment in the quietest manner practicable (such as speed restrictions, retarder brake restrictions, and engine speed restrictions).
Land Use	Comply, to the extent practicable, with the development standards of the BCCO during the cemetery design.
	Coordinate with the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA) during the cemetery design and construction. Submit Notice of Proposed Construction or Alteration Form 7460-1 and Notice of Actual Construction or Alteration Form 7460-2 to FAA, if applicable.
Wetlands, Floodplains, and Coastal Zone Management	None required.
Socioeconomics	Secure construction areas to prevent unauthorized access by children from nearby residential areas.
Community Services	None required.
Solid Waste and Hazardous Materials	Develop and implement an Educational Institutional Control to inform, educate, and protect personnel performing ground intrusive work at the Site from injury in the unlikely event of discovering a munitions and explosives of concern item.
	Comply with applicable federal and state laws governing the use, generation, storage, transportation, and disposal of solid waste and hazardous materials.

Technical Resource Area	Measure
Transportation and Parking	Coordinate with the Bernalillo County Department of Public Works during the cemetery design to determine cemetery entrance locations and identify and implement any necessary roadway improvements.
	Ensure cemetery construction activities do not adversely affect traffic flow on local roadways; construction would be timed to avoid peak travel hours.
	Ensure debris and/or soil is not deposited on local roadways during the construction activities.
Utilities	Contact the local utility providers to determine the connection/extension requirements and implement the necessary requirements.
	Consult with the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority to determine if the municipal water system has sufficient capacity for cemetery irrigation.
	If it is determined that VA would be required to install or fund the installation of new water transmission lines to service the cemetery, conduct supplemental NEPA and NHPA analysis prior to construction, as required.
	Obtain approval and a permit from the NMOSE to install an on-site irrigation water well, if necessary.
	If connection to the sanitary sewer system is not feasible and an on-site septic system is necessary, obtain a NMED Environmental Health Bureau Liquid Waste Permit for the septic system(s).
	Plant low moisture tolerant species suited to central New Mexico to the extent possible to minimize irrigation needs.
Environmental Justice	None required.