

Department of Veterans Affairs

425 I Street, NW
Washington, DC 20001



DRAFT SITE-SPECIFIC

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

FOR PHASE 1 OF THE PROPOSED CONSTRUCTION AND OPERATION OF A

New Veterans Affairs National Cemetery

El Paso County, Colorado

May 2016



SITE-SPECIFIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT ABSTRACT

Lead Agency for the EA: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Title of Proposed Action: Proposed Phase 1 Construction of a New Veterans Affairs National Cemetery at Drennan Road, Colorado Springs, CO 80903
Affected Jurisdiction: El Paso County Assessor's Parcel 5500000384, Drennan Road, Colorado Springs, CO
Document Designation: Draft Site-Specific Environmental Assessment
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This Site-Specific Environmental Assessment (SEA) identifies, analyzes, and documents the potential physical, environmental, cultural, and socioeconomic impacts associated with the United States (U.S.) Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) National Cemetery Administration (NCA) Proposed Action for the Phase 1 construction and management of the new VA National Cemetery in the southern Colorado area. The VA acquired the 374.3-acre cemetery site in July 2012 after a Final Programmatic EA (PEA) was completed. The Final PEA analyzed the potential environmental effects of acquiring the site for the new National Cemetery and, to a lesser extent and based on general design information available at that time, of constructing and operating a National Cemetery at that selected site. This SEA is "tiered" from the July 2012 PEA to more precisely analyze, based on the design, the site-specific potential environmental effects that could occur at the site and within the region of influence (ROI).

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to enable the VA to provide eligible veterans and their families in southern Colorado with a new National Cemetery of sufficient size and capacity to serve the projected needs in the southern Colorado region for the next ten years. The Proposed Action is needed to meet the VA NCA goal of providing eligible veterans with reasonable access to VA burial options.

This SEA evaluates two (2) alternatives in depth: the Preferred Alternative and the No Action Alternative. The Preferred Alternative is to implement Phase 1 of the VA's preferred design and operation of a new VA National Cemetery in southern Colorado. The new VA National Cemetery would be constructed in phases; the first phase, approximately 65 acres, would be constructed starting in 2017. Under the No Action Alternative, the proposed new VA National Cemetery would not be developed. This alternative reflects the status quo and serves as a baseline against which the effects of the Proposed Action can be evaluated.

This SEA evaluates possible effects to aesthetics, air quality, geology and soils, hydrology and water quality, floodplains and wetlands, wildlife and habitat, cultural resources, noise, utilities, transportation and parking, and cumulative effects. Technical resource areas that were eliminated through the PEA process are discussed in Section 1.2. This SEA concludes that there would be no significant direct, indirect, or cumulative effects on the local environment or quality of life associated with implementing the Preferred Alternative.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This Site-Specific Environmental Assessment (SEA) has been prepared to analyze and evaluate the potential effects of actions associated with the Phase 1 construction and management of the new Veterans Affairs (VA) National Cemetery in southern Colorado. This SEA is prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA; 42 United States Code [U.S.C.] 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), 38 CFR Part 26 (Environmental Effects of the Department of Veterans Affairs Actions), and the VA's NEPA Interim Guidance for Projects (VA 2010).

This SEA is “tiered” from a previously prepared Programmatic Environmental Assessment (PEA), finalized in July 2012, which identified, analyzed, and documented potential impacts of selecting and acquiring the 374.3-acre site for a new VA National Cemetery in southern Colorado. The PEA analyzed the potential environmental effects of acquiring the cemetery site for this Proposed Action and, to a lesser extent and based on general design information available at the time, of constructing and operating a VA National Cemetery at the selected site. The Final PEA indicated that the VA would prepare this subsequent, tiered SEA to more precisely analyze and evaluate the potential effects of the construction and operation of Phase 1 of the proposed new VA National Cemetery at the selected site, when site-specific design information was available.

Purpose of and Need for the Proposed Action

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to enable the VA to provide eligible veterans and their families in southern Colorado with a new National Cemetery of sufficient size and capacity to serve the projected needs in the southern Colorado region for the next ten years.

The Proposed Action is needed to meet the VA National Cemetery Administration (NCA) goal of providing eligible veterans with reasonable access to VA burial options.

Proposed Action and Alternatives Considered

In accordance with NEPA and CEQ regulations for implementing NEPA, alternatives to the Proposed Action must be considered. However, detailed analysis is only required for those alternatives that reasonably fulfill the purpose of, and need for, the Proposed Action. As such, this SEA only examines the Proposed Action (the Preferred Alternative) and the No Action Alternative, as required by NEPA.

Following the acquisition of the property on July 31, 2012, the VA initiated an extensive, five-step master planning process to determine the optimal configuration of the proposed National Cemetery. As part of that master planning process, the VA identified 10 screening criteria to evaluate the physical, operational, and location requirements of the Proposed Action, as well as cost, environmental issues, and other factors. Satisfaction of the VA's screening criteria would provide locations and facilities best suited to meet the purpose of, and need for, the Proposed Action, while minimizing overall project costs and environmental effects.



Since the inception of the project, the VA has worked with the architects and engineers responsible for designing the project to identify and evaluate a range of design alternatives. Through the five major iterations of the design process, the VA evaluated the design alternatives and incorporated the design options that best met the VA's screening criteria and needs. Throughout the design process, the VA strived to avoid sensitive environmental resources, such as protected species habitat, wetlands, and floodplains. The Proposed Action design avoids all of these resources to the greatest extent practicable.

Two alternatives are analyzed in-depth in this EA, the Preferred Alternative and the No Action Alternative, described in the following sections.

- **Preferred Alternative.** The VA's Proposed Action, analyzed in this SEA as the Preferred Alternative, is to develop the first phase of a new National Cemetery on 65 acres of a 374.3-acre site in unincorporated El Paso County, Colorado. Under the Preferred Alternative, the initial phase (Phase 1) of the Proposed Action would consist of development of approximately 65 acres on the northern portion of the cemetery site to provide for approximately 10 years of burial capacity. Construction of the proposed cemetery is anticipated to be phased-in over several years. Upon completion of Phase 1 cemetery construction, the site would include an estimated 13,300 total interment sites, including 4,500 double-depth pre-placed crypts, 4,500 columbarium niches, 650 plots for private vaults, 650 oversized plots, and 3,000 in-ground sites for cremated remains. The project would also include memorial walls, an ossuary, a hybrid burial area, a memorial walkway, an entrance area, a flag/assembly area, committal shelters, an administration and public information building, a maintenance facility, a road system, associated utilities, and infrastructure and landscaping. Future phases of cemetery development would be analyzed under separate NEPA documents prior to the construction and operation of those phases.
- **No Action Alternative.** Under the No Action Alternative, the Proposed Action would not be implemented. Veterans and their families residing in southern Colorado would continue to be unserved; in many cases, this would continue to require many veterans and their families to travel more than 75 miles to reach a National Cemetery. The distribution of national cemeteries in the region would continue to be unequal, and the VA would not be in compliance with the requirements of the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act. The absence of a National Cemetery in southern Colorado could prevent eligible veterans and their families from obtaining the earned benefit of a no-cost burial at a National Cemetery, resulting in undue hardship and lost recognition to those individuals.

The Preferred Alternative provides the option that would advance the requirements of the VA. The No Action Alternative would not enable the VA to provide adequate, long-term National Cemetery facilities in Southern Colorado. The No Action Alternative reflects the status quo and serves as a benchmark against which the effects of the Proposed Action can be evaluated and was retained to provide a comparative baseline against which to analyze the effects of the Proposed Action, as required under the CEQ Regulations (40 CFR 1502.14).



Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

The affected environment of the Preferred Alternative and its immediate surroundings, or the region of influence (ROI), was evaluated for 10 resources and is further discussed in Section 3 of this SEA. The Preferred Alternative and the No Action Alternative are evaluated to determine their potential direct, indirect, and cumulative effect(s) on the physical, environmental, cultural, and socioeconomic aspects of the Proposed Action’s ROI. The VA determined that five technical resource areas were sufficiently analyzed in the PEA and did not require further analysis in this SEA, including land use, solid and hazardous waste, socioeconomics, community services, and environmental justice. Table ES-1 presents the resource categories analyzed within this SEA, including anticipated impacts.

Table ES-1. Comparison of Potential Environmental Consequences

Resource Area	Preferred Alternative	No Action Alternative
Aesthetics	□ ◇	○
Air Quality	◇	□
Geology and Soils	□ ◇	○
Hydrology and Water Quality	◇	○
Floodplains and Wetlands	◇ +	○
Wildlife and Habitat	□ ◇	○
Cultural Resources	◇ ●	○
Noise	◇	○
Wetlands	□ ◇	○
Utilities	□ ◇	○
Transportation and Parking	□	○

Notes: + = Beneficial effect; ○ = No effect; □ = Negligible effect; ◇ = Minor adverse impact; ● = Moderate adverse impact; ✖ = Potentially significant adverse impact

Agency and Public Involvement

A public meeting (initial scoping meeting) was held and hosted by the VA on October 21, 2015, from 6:00 until 7:00 p.m. at the Retired Enlisted Association located at 834 Emory Circle, Colorado Springs, Colorado. The intent of the meeting was to introduce the local community to the VA team, explain the general NEPA process, and gather initial public input and concerns about the Proposed Action. The VA addressed all questions and comments and explained that these and other concerns would be taken into account in the design, including local government concerns.



The Draft SEA will be published and distributed for a 30-day public comment period, as announced by a Notice of Availability (NOA) published in the *Pueblo Chieftain* and the *Gazette* newspapers. During this period, review copies of the Draft SEA will be made available for public review at the Ruth Holly and Sand Creek branches of the Pikes Peak Library District, and on the VA website (<http://www.cem.va.gov/EA.asp>). Public comments received within the 30-day public comment period will be reviewed and addressed, as warranted, in the Final SEA.

Conclusions

No significant direct, indirect, or cumulative effects to the local environment or quality of life would be anticipated as a result of the implementation of the Preferred Alternative. Public comments on this Draft SEA will be considered in the preparation of the Final SEA.



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