



United States Department of the Interior



FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
 Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office
 2493 Portola Road, Suite B
 Ventura, California 93003

IN REPLY REFER TO:
 08EVEN00-2018-TA-0899

February 22, 2019

William Collins, Environmental Coordinator
 Department of the Army
 Army Base Realignment and Closure, Fort Ord Office
 P.O. Box 5008, Building #4463 Gigling Road
 Monterey, California 93944-5008

Subject: Changes to Vegetation Clearance Activities Under the Programmatic Biological Opinion for Cleanup and Property Transfer Actions Conducted at the Former Fort Ord, Monterey County, California (2017-F-0094)

Dear Mr. Collins:

We have reviewed your request, dated May 14, 2018 and received in our office on June 4, 2018, for reinitiation of formal consultation for ongoing cleanup and property transfer actions on the former Fort Ord, Monterey, California. Your request concerns proposed changes to vegetation removal activities and their effects on the federally endangered Contra Costa goldfields (*Lasthenia conjugens*), Monterey gilia (*Gilia tenuiflora* ssp. *arenaria*), and Yadon's piperia (*Piperia yadonii*), and the federally threatened California tiger salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*) and Monterey spineflower (*Chorizanthe pungens* var. *pungens*) and its critical habitat. Our response is provided in accordance with section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (Act) of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq.). We have based our response on your May 14, 2018 letter and attached biological assessment (Army 2018) and Impossible Canyon Complex fire safety evaluation (Kemron 2018), the 2018 Fort Ord annual biomonitoring report summary provided on December 21, 2018 (B. Kowalski, pers. comm.), and other communications with your staff.

The Army proposes to change the location and extent of activities previously analyzed in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) programmatic biological opinion for Army cleanup activities conducted on the former Fort Ord (Service 2017, PBO). The changes include not conducting prescribed burns as originally proposed on 1100 acres of central maritime chaparral habitat (CMC); manually or mechanically (masticating) clearing 746 acres of CMC in Units 5, 13, 17, and 20, primarily within the 1100 acres that would not be burned; and remasticating up to 379 acres of CMC to support removal of sensitively fuzed munitions. The proposed mastication of 125 acres in Unit 5 was previously addressed by the Service (M. Ogonowski 2018, pers. comm.) and will not be discussed further. The Army indicates that the changes are necessary based on evaluation of the safety of conducting prescribed burns in the eastern portion of the impact area and other factors.

Not Conducting Prescribed Burns on 1100 Acres

The Fort Ord Prescribed Burn Team conducted an assessment of prescribed burns in Units 9, 13, 17, 20, 25, and 31 (Kemron 2018), concluding it was unsafe to conduct burns in these units with the

exception of Unit 31. This determination was based on the proximity of units to homes and structures, the manner in which topography and prevailing winds would likely affect fire behavior in this portion of Fort Ord, and significant risk of an escaped wildfire. Based on this assessment, prescribed burns would not be conducted in Units 13, 17, and 20, nor would follow up prescribed burns occur in Units 9 and 25. (The Army planned to conduct a prescribed burn in Unit 31 in 2018.) The total area of units which would not have a prescribed burn as previously planned is 1100 acres.

Manual/Mechanical Vegetation Clearance of 621 Acres

The Army proposes to use manual or mechanical methods to clear 621 acres of CMC originally proposed for prescribed burns in Units 13, 17, and 20 in order to safely conduct munitions clearance. As stated above, prescribed burning was determined to be unsafe in these units due to the proximity of homes and structures and physical characteristics that create a high risk of escaped wildfire. Manual vegetation clearance would consist of using hand tools such as mowers, weed whippers, loppers, and chain saws to cut standing vegetation at the base or prune it sufficiently to allow access and improved visibility for detection of munitions. Manually cleared vegetation would typically be chipped and hauled offsite, or in some cases redistributed onsite in limited amounts. Mechanical vegetation clearance would be conducted using equipment such as a Brush Hog, Bobcat with mowing deck, or similar machinery. Standing vegetation would be cut initially to a height of approximately 2 feet to facilitate a check for munitions, then to 6 inches by making one or more additional passes in a manner minimizing ground disturbance. The mowing apparatus would shred woody vegetation in place leaving shredded material on the ground, the amount and size of which depends on the equipment used and density of vegetation.

Remastication of up to 379 Acres to Support Sifting Operations

The PBO describes the Army's plan to sift an estimated 85 acres to clear the Impact Area of munitions with sensitive fuzes. To delineate the sifting areas, the Army would remasticate up to 379 acres of CMC. Most remasticated areas within individual units would be under 50 acres, however the Army estimates that in Unit 23 and Range 48 up to 111 and 133 acres, respectively, will need to be remasticated. Up to 180 acres would be remasticated in areas slated for future prescribed burns and 168 acres in previously burned areas. The remaining 31 acres would be in Unit 28, which has been previously masticated but is not planned to be burned.

The Service's original (1993) biological opinion for munitions cleanup and reuse of Fort Ord required the Army to develop and implement a multispecies habitat management plan (Corps 1997, HMP) to promote conservation of special status species affected by the Army's actions, including federally listed species. The HMP designates prescribed burns as the primary method of vegetation clearance in areas containing CMC designated as Habitat Reserve or Development with Reserve Areas or Restrictions, given the positive response of CMC to fire. However, manual and mechanical clearance methods may be used instead of burning under restrictive circumstances where they will not undermine the goals of the HMP, including situations where burning cannot be conducted safely due to potential wildfire and smoke impacts on populated areas (Service 2017). The PBO states that manual and mechanical vegetation clearance within habitat reserve areas containing CMC would typically be limited to 50 acres or less within a unit, but that this limitation does not apply in areas with a high risk of wildfire.

The Army proposes a significant reduction in the total area that would be burned and an increase in the area that would be cleared of vegetation using manual or mechanical methods relative to the areas described for these activities in the PBO (Service 2017). However, based on recent monitoring data these changes are not expected to introduce effects to listed species that we have not previously analyzed in the PBO. For example, surveys of ponds known to support California tiger salamanders on Fort Ord following mastication of adjacent upland habitat indicate that frequencies of detection are similar to ponds within burned areas and to reference ponds (Army 2018). Similarly, significant numbers of Yadon's piperia plants have been found within containment lines of Unit 12, which have been masticated twice in support of prescribed burns.

The PBO indicates that mechanical removal of vegetation that leaves chipped vegetation in place could adversely affect Monterey gilia and Monterey spineflower by reducing the availability of suitable open habitat (Service 2017). However, monitoring data have revealed no significant differences in the persistence and recovery of these taxa between burned and masticated units overall, though response to treatment for a given species may vary between adjacent units (Tetra Tech and EcoSystems West 2014, 2015; Burleson 2016, 2017; Army 2018; Burleson 2018; B. Kowalski pers. comm. 2018). In addition, both species have generally met success criteria within masticated units. Given that population densities of annual plants can vary significantly from year to year given environmental variables, the Army plans to conduct a comprehensive multivariate analysis of monitoring data to better compare any potential effects of mastication versus prescribed burns on Monterey gilia, Monterey spineflower, and other species covered by the HMP.

The Service has determined that the proposed changes to the Army's activities on former Fort Ord fall within the scope of the action described and effects to federally listed species previously analyzed in the Service's PBO, and that reinitiation of formal consultation is not required. The Army will continue to implement all conservation measures and monitoring for listed species described in the PBO, and implement corrective actions as needed if success criteria are not met. This letter constitutes an amendment to the Description of the Proposed Action section of the PBO, and no further action is required at this time.

If you have any questions regarding this letter, please contact Mark Ogonowski of my staff at (805) 644-1766 ext. 53350, or by electronic mail at mark_ogonowski@fws.gov.

Sincerely,



Leilani Takano
Assistant Field Supervisor

LITERATURE CITED

Burleson Consulting, Inc. 2016. 2015 Annual Monitoring Report for BLM Area B, Subareas A, B, B-3 East, B-3 West, and C, and Units 05, 13, and 20; Units 01 West, 02 West, and 03 West; Units 02 East and 03 East; Units 15, 21, 32, and 34; and 2015 Annual Wetland Vegetation and Wildlife Monitoring Report; Former Fort Ord. AR# BW-2795.

Burleson Consulting, Inc. 2017. 2016 Annual Report Biological Monitoring for Units 09, 23N, and 28, and Units 11 and 12 Containment Lines; Units 01 East, 06, 07, 10, Watkins Gate Burned Area, and MOUT Buffer; Units 04, and Units 11 and 12 Interior; Units 18 and 22. AR# BW-2824

Burleson Consulting, Inc. 2018. 2017 Annual Report Biological Monitoring for Unit 17; Unit 25 and Units 13, 20, and 31 Containment Lines; Units 1 West, 2 West, and 3 West; Units 2 East and 3 East; and Units 14 and 19. AR# BW-2845.

[Kemron] Kemron Environmental Services, Inc. 2018. Impossible Canyon Complex prescribed burning fire safety evaluation. Prepared for Fort Ord Prescribed Burn Team, March 2018.

[Tetra Tech and EcoSystems West] TetraTech, Inc. and EcoSystems West Consulting Group. 2014. 2013 Biological Monitoring Report for Units 7, 5E, and 23E; Units 15, 21, 32, and 24; Units 18 and 22; and Ranges 43-48, Former Fort Ord. AR# BW-2692.

[Tetra Tech and EcoSystems West] TetraTech, Inc. and EcoSystems West Consulting Group. 2015. 2014 Biological Monitoring Report for Units 25 and 31; Units 06, 07, 10, 33, WGBA and MOUT; Units 04, 11, 12 and 23N; Units 14 and 19; and MRS-16, Former Fort Ord. AR# BW-2739.

[Corps] U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. 1997. Installation-wide multispecies habitat management plan for Former Fort Ord, California. April. Sacramento, California.

[Army] U.S. Department of the Army. 2018. Biological assessment of changes to Army actions which may affect listed species at former Fort Ord, California. Prepared by Base Realignment and Closure, Fort Ord Field Office, Monterey, California. May 14, 2018.

[Service] U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1993. Biological opinion for the disposal and reuse of Fort Ord, Monterey County, California (1-8-93-F-14). U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office, Ventura, California.

[Service] U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2017. Programmatic biological opinion for cleanup and property transfer actions conducted at the former Fort Ord, Monterey County, California. Reinitiation of formal consultation (2017-F-0094). U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office, Ventura, California. June 7, 2017.

PERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS

Bartholomew Kowalski, Chenega Support Services, Fort Ord BRAC Office. Electronic mail with attachment submitted to Mark Ogonowski, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office, summarizing results of 2018 Fort Ord annual biomonitoring report, December 21, 2018.

Mark Ogonowski, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office. Electronic mail to Bart Kowalski, Wildlife Biologist, Chenega Support Services, Fort Ord BRAC Office, indicating conformity of the Army's proposed mastication of Unit 5 with the existing Fort Ord PBO, August 31, 2018.