

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
PROPOSED HELIPAD AT THE SAN FRANCISCO VETERANS AFFAIRS
MEDICAL CENTER**

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

The attached environmental assessment (EA) analyzes the potential for impacts to the environment as a result of construction and operation of a helipad at the San Francisco Veterans Affairs Medical Center (SFVAMC). The EA was prepared in accordance with the regulations set forth by the Council on Environmental Quality implementing the provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (CEQ Regulations, Title 40 CFR 1500-1508); Executive Order 11514 as amended by Executive Order 11991; and VA Regulations - Environmental Effects of VA Actions (Title 38 CFR Part 26). The attached EA is incorporated by reference into this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI).

This FONSI summarizes the Proposed Action and alternatives and the results of the evaluation of the construction and operation of the helipad at the SFVAMC.

Description of Proposed Action and Alternatives

The proposed action is to construct and operate a helipad at SFVAMC. The helipad is needed to provide emergency helicopter landing capabilities at the SFVAMC and would be used by the VA to complete its role as a Federal Coordination Center (FCC) with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Department of Homeland Security. The helipad would be used only to transport coordination officials, supplies, and casualties to support the City of San Francisco and local community during natural and manmade disasters. The 54-ft diameter helipad would be constructed at the northwestern edge of the SFVAMC site. Two helicopter flight paths would be designated, one to the northwest and one to the northeast of the helipad. Both flight paths would be over the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and the ocean. Neither would be located over residences.

Under the Rooftop Alternative, the helipad would be constructed on the roof of SFVAMC Building 210. Two helicopter flight paths would be designated, one to the northwest and one to the northeast of the helipad. Both flight paths would be over a number of SFVAMC buildings, the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and the ocean. Neither would be located over residences.

Under the No Action Alternative no helipad would be constructed at the SFVAMC.

Summary of Environmental Consequences

Analysis indicates the proposed action would not result in short-term, long-term, or cumulative impacts to the following resources: real property, resident population, and environmental justice.

The proposed action would have minimal to moderate impacts on aesthetics; air quality; community services; cultural resources; economic activity; floodplains, noise; wetlands, coastal zone, etc.; geology and soils; hydrology and water quality; land use; public safety and solid/hazardous waste; transportation and parking; utilities; and vegetation and wildlife.

No severe impacts were identified.

Views of the helipad from the Golden Gate National Recreation Area would be minimal, being only visible from a small section of the trail below. The helipad would not be noticeable from the Golden Gate Bridge or the Marin Headlands. The helipad would not be out of character with the SFVAMC site as a whole, which is intensively developed with multi-story buildings, parking lots, and paved streets. Maintenance of trees within the safety area would not substantially change the character of the skyline. Aesthetic impacts would be short-term and are considered minimal.

Sources of air pollutants from the proposed action are construction equipment exhaust and dust during construction, and helicopter emissions during operations. With implementation of Bay Area Air Quality Management District's (BAAQMD) standard construction dust control measures, construction emissions would be minimal. The proposed action would be consistent with the Bay Area Clean Air Plan and the Ozone Attainment Plan. Greenhouse gas emissions would occur from combustion during construction and during helicopter flights. Construction-related greenhouse gas emissions would be brief (two months) and are considered negligible on both a project level and cumulative level. Air quality impacts are considered minimal.

The helipad would benefit community services by providing a landing spot for helicopters transporting coordination officials and supplies to support the City of San Francisco and local community during natural and manmade disasters.

Solid waste in the form of construction debris and soil would be generated during construction that would require disposal at a landfill. The amount of landfill space and storm drainage facility capacity needed to serve the project would be minimal. There would be no effect on other community services including police, fire, and emergency services, or the need for recreation facilities.

Building 14, Building 18, and a historic landscape area that runs along the northern edge of the SFVAMC site are within the project's indirect area of potential effect (APE) for historic resources. Building 18 is considered a contributing resource to a potential historic district under Criterion C. The helipad would not impact the historic architectural integrity of Building 18, and because of the helipad's relatively low profile and the presence of an intervening parking lot, the visual impact on Building 18 is considered minimal. In addition, because the helipad would be located adjacent to, but not within, the historic landscape area, impacts are considered moderate. The proposed action would have no impact on known archaeological resources. In the unlikely event that unanticipated archeological resources are encountered during construction, actions would be taken to ensure proper treatment of such resources in accordance with regulatory requirements.

The proposed action would make a slight contribution to the local economy by the use of local construction contractor labor and through the possible purchase of local construction materials and supplies. Helipad operation is not anticipated to affect economic activity.

No wetlands or waters would be affected. The proposed action would increase the amount of surface run off from the SFVAMC. This storm water would be directed away from the helipad toward the adjacent parking lot where it would enter the SFVAMC storm water system. The site is situated within a Coastal Zone Management Area. As described in the EA, any impacts to coastal zone resources would be minimal.

The helipad would be designed according to the recommendations provided by a professional geotechnical engineer and therefore seismic-related impacts would be minimal.

The additional impervious surface created by the concrete helipad on groundwater levels is considered minimal. The project would have no effect on groundwater quality. The proposed action would comply with the NPDES Permit issued to the SFVAMC. Therefore, the project's effects on surface water quality are considered minimal. The project would have no effect on surface water hydrology.

Impacts on land use are considered minimal. Addition of a helipad to the Medical Center would improve effective use of the site and would be consistent with the San Francisco General Plan and Public zoning designation. The project also would be consistent with the Western Shoreline Plan and the Local Coastal Plan. The infrequent and unpredictable nature of the overflights, given that they would only occur in a manmade or natural disaster, would not interfere with the adjacent public recreational and cultural land uses. The helicopter overflights would not traverse residential areas, and would not interfere with the residential land uses.

Construction noise would occur for approximately two months and would not disturb residential properties to the south of the SFVAMC. When a national or local disaster occurs, the helipad could be used several times a day, during daylight hours only. The number or frequency of flights cannot be reasonably estimated. Flight paths are not over residential neighborhoods or medical center buildings, but do cross over the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. In the residential areas, noise levels would not be inconsistent with the existing noise environment, would be restricted to daytime only, would not interfere with sleep, and are not expected to cause substantial disturbance.

The helipad would provide a landing spot for FEMA or Homeland Security coordination officials supplies, and casualties. This would have a beneficial effect on public health and safety.

Any solid or hazardous waste generated during construction would be removed from the SFVAMC and disposed of in accordance with federal, state and local regulations. Many provisions are in place to ensure safe operations of the SFVAMC helipad. The FAA has provided a determination that the helipad would "not adversely affect the safe and efficient use of the navigable airspace by aircraft." Potential impacts on public safety are considered minimal.

Increases in traffic during construction are considered moderate due to their temporary and limited duration. During construction, nine adjacent parking spaces would be reserved for construction contractor parking. Because the loss of parking spaces would only extend over a two-month period and the number of parking spaces lost would be small, this impact is considered minimal.

Based upon the anticipated frequency of use of the helipad and limited amount of time the helipad lights would be used, the use of electricity would be minimal.

The trees on and in the vicinity of the helipad site may provide nesting habitat for resident and migratory birds. Preconstruction Roosting Bat Surveys and Nesting Bird Surveys would ensure that any roosting bats or nesting birds would be given appropriate consideration in accordance with regulatory requirements. Impacts on biological resources are considered minimal.

Summary of Mitigative Actions

The following mitigative actions that are part of the proposed action, or required by regulation, would be undertaken.

- 1) If unanticipated archaeological resources or possible human remains are encountered during construction, ground-disturbing activities will be halted and consultation with a professional archaeologist (and County Coroner in the case of discovery of human remains), the State Historic Preservation Officer, and tribal representatives, will be undertaken, as appropriate. A plan will be developed and carried out to ensure that the resource is given proper treatment.
- 2) During construction the requirements for noise control outlined in the VA Specification Section 01568 Environmental Protection shall be implemented.
- 3) Regular inspections of the adjacent bluff will be scheduled each year to reassess the ongoing condition of the slope and to determine the need for slope protection. If needed, slope protection measures would be implemented as recommended by a professional geotechnical engineer.
- 4) Construction and operation of the helipad shall be in accordance with the procedures outlined in the SFVAMD Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan (SWPPP) to eliminate or reduce pollution-related to storm water runoff.
- 5) Any solid and hazardous wastes generated during helipad construction shall be removed from the SFVAMC and disposed of in accordance with federal, state and local regulations. No hazardous materials or wastes shall be stored at the helipad.
- 6) Preconstruction surveys for bats that may be roosting in trees that are scheduled for removal or topping shall be conducted by a qualified biologist within 48 hours of removal activity.
- 7) Preconstruction surveys for nesting birds shall be conducted for construction activities, including tree removal, that occur between February 1 and August 1. The survey shall be conducted by a qualified biologist within 48 hours of construction. Trees within a 200-foot radius shall be included in the surveys. If active nests are identified, the biologist must consult with the California Department of Fish and Game biologist for the region regarding protective action.
- 8) Construction dust control measures recommended by the Bay Area Air Quality Management District shall be followed.

Preliminary Decision

As a result of the analysis of impacts of the proposed action, it is the Department of Veteran Affairs' preliminary conclusion that, with the incorporation of appropriate construction practices and compliance with regulatory requirements, as described in the Environmental Assessment and summarized in this FONSI, the proposed action would not have a significant environmental impact; therefore an environmental impact statement will not be prepared. A final decision on the FONSI and proposed action will be made after public comments on the FONSI are received and considered. Public comments on the FONSI will be accepted by the VA until September 23, 2008. All comments should be e-mailed to Judi.Cheary2@va.gov or mailed to Judi Cheary, Public Affairs Officer, Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center, 4150 Clement Street, San Francisco, California 94121.

If the FONSI is signed by the San Francisco VA Medical Center Chief of Engineering/Deputy Chief of Engineering, it will be made available to individuals upon request.