

NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND SPACE ADMINISTRATION

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT: Marsh Fiber Project

AGENCY: NASA Goddard Space Flight Center's Wallops Flight Facility

ACTION: Finding of No Significant Impact

SUMMARY: Pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended (42 United States Code [U.S.C.] 4321 et seq.), the Council on Environmental Quality Regulations for implementing NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations Parts 1500-1508), and National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) policy and procedures (14 CFR Part 1216 Subpart 1216.3), NASA has made a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) with respect to its proposed Marsh Fiber Project at Wallops Flight Facility (WFF), Accomack County, Virginia.

ADDRESS: The Final Environmental Assessment (EA) that supports and serves as a basis for this FONSI may be reviewed in electronic format at: [https://code200-external.gsfc.nasa.gov/250-WFF/Marsh Fiber EA](https://code200-external.gsfc.nasa.gov/250-WFF/Marsh_Fiber_EA)

A limited number of copies of the EA may be obtained by contacting the NASA representative at the address or telephone number indicated below.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, CONTACT:

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SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION:

NASA has prepared an EA that is tiered from the May 2019 *NASA WFF Site-Wide Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement* (Final Site-wide PEIS), in which NASA evaluated the environmental consequences of constructing and operating new facilities and infrastructure at WFF. NASA prepared the Tiered EA to analyze potential impacts on the environment resulting from the proposed installation of an underground fiber optic cable between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Wallops Island National Wildlife Refuge (Wallops Island NWR) and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Spaceport (MARS) Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) Airstrip on Wallops Island in Accomack County, Virginia. The fiber optic cable, referred to as the “Marsh Fiber,” would provide a reliable, secure, and rapid means of transmitting a diverse range of data to meet the current and future information technology demands to support the mission of NASA and its tenants at WFF.

Currently, a single fiber optic cable system along Atlantic Road provides communications and command data from the WFF Main Base to Wallops Island. Damage or failure of the single cable system would put NASA, tenants, and the public at risk for disruptions to launch command and information technology services. The project is needed to provide a redundant, geographically diverse, and reliable means of highspeed fiber optic communications for NASA, Department of Defense, and commercial systems on Wallops Island. The existing cable system would remain in operation as backup.

The proposed alignment of the Marsh Fiber pathway between the Wallops Island NWR and the west side of Walker Marsh has changed from what was presented in the April 2020 Draft EA. The alignment was moved slightly north to avoid crossing under private property; all project activities, both above and below ground, would now occur on federal or state-owned property.

Because the proposed Marsh Fiber path would be installed on the Wallops Island NWR, which is owned and managed by the USFWS, the USFWS is a cooperating agency on the EA.

Alternatives Considered

NASA considered seven alternatives for the Proposed Action, which were evaluated using screening criteria. One action alternative met the screening criteria and thus the purpose and need of the project. All other action alternatives were dismissed from further consideration in the EA; therefore, the EA evaluates in detail one action alternative (the Proposed Action) and the No Action Alternative.

Under the Proposed Action, NASA would use a combination of horizontal directional drilling and vibratory trenching methods to install the fiber optic cable under waterways and across the saltmarsh. Under the No Action Alternative, NASA would not install a new fiber optic cable.

Environmental Analysis

The EA examines the potential effects of the alternatives on physical, biological, and social resources. Resources evaluated in detail include: noise, air quality, hazardous and regulated materials and waste, health and safety, land use, land resources, water resources, vegetation, wildlife, aquaculture, special status species, transportation, infrastructure and utilities, employment and income, recreation, and archaeological resources. In summary, the EA concludes that potential effects to these resources would be negligible to not significant, and fall within the bounds of analysis in the Final Site-wide PEIS.

The limits of disturbance associated with the proposed action on the Wallops Island NWR changed between the Draft EA and the Final EA. NASA coordinated with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (VDHR) under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act for potential effects to historic properties at the new Wallops Island NWR site. VDHR responded recommending that a Phase I archaeological survey of the new site be conducted. NASA is in the process of completing the archaeological survey as requested and will submit the results and a determination of effects under Section 106 of the NHPA to VDHR for review and concurrence.

NASA would not begin work on the Wallops Island NWR until coordination under Section 106 is complete. If a potentially historic resource is found, NASA would work with VDHR to implement appropriate measures to avoid, minimize, and mitigate potential adverse effects, as needed. Because all permits and coordination are complete for the Wallops Island and Walker Marsh project sites, NASA would start work on these portions of the project upon signature of this FONSI.

Public Involvement

During the scoping period that began July 19, 2019, and ended August 21, 2019, NASA invited federal, state, and local agencies to provide input into the development of the EA.

NASA notified the public of the availability of the Draft EA for review and comment during a 30-day public comment period through advertisements placed in the *Chincoteague Beacon*, the *Eastern Shore News*, and the *Eastern Shore Post*. As advertised in the newspapers, the EA was available on the internet in Adobe® portable document format (pdf) at: https://code200-external.gsfc.nasa.gov/250-WFF/Marsh_Fiber_EA, and hard copies of the EA were available upon request.

Due to the current situation with COVID 19 and the Governor's Temporary Stay at Home Order (Executive Order 55), a public meeting was not held. In lieu of the public meeting, NASA posted a presentation that could be viewed at any time during the public comment period at the internet address above.

NASA received eight comments on the Draft EA from five commenters. Comments provided additional information on vegetation and cultural resources, and requested clarification about wildlife, water quality, groundwater, and alternatives. In preparing the Final EA, NASA considered all comments received on the Draft EA. Comments on the Draft EA and NASA's responses to each comment are provided in Appendix A of the Final EA.

The Final EA and FONSI (this document) are also available for review on the project website. As with the Draft EA, advertisements were placed in the *Chincoteague Beacon*, the *Eastern Shore News*, and the *Eastern Shore Post*.

Related Environmental Reviews

While preparing the EA, NASA conducted consultations pursuant to the Endangered Species Act (16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq.), Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (16 U.S.C. 1801 et seq.), National Historic Preservation Act (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.), Clean Water Act (33 U.S.C. 1251 et seq.), and Coastal Zone Management Act (16 U.S.C. 1451 et seq.). As such, NASA has met its obligations with respect to these statutes in parallel with the development of the EA.

Conclusion

In accordance with the Final Site-wide PEIS, NASA prepared the Marsh Fiber EA prior to initiating the proposed action. On the basis of the Final EA, NASA has determined that the environmental impacts associated with installing a new fiber optic cable between the Wallops Island NWR and Wallops Island would not individually or cumulatively have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment and that these actions are consistent with the Final Site-wide PEIS. Therefore, a new Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

David L. Pierce
Director, Wallops Flight Facility

Date