



United States
Department of
Agriculture

**Forest
Service**

Pacific
Southwest
Region

June 2012



Preliminary Environmental Assessment for Pacific Heliport Reconstruction Project Eldorado National Forest



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Preliminary Environmental Assessment

Pacific Heliport Reconstruction Project

*USDA Forest Service, Eldorado National Forest
Pacific Ranger District
El Dorado County, California*

Introduction

The USDA Forest Service has prepared this Environmental Assessment (EA) in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). This Environmental Assessment discloses the environmental impacts that would result from implementing the proposed action. Additional documentation, including more detailed analyses of the project-area resources referenced in this document can be found in the Project Planning Record located at the Pacific Ranger District Office in Pollock Pines, CA.

Location

The Pacific Heliport Reconstruction Project is located on the Pacific Ranger District compound in Pollock Pines, CA (nw ¼ section 34, T.11N., R.13E.) and at Big Hill, which is located approximately 6 air miles northeast of Pollock Pines, CA (ne ¼, se ¼ section 33, T.12.N., R.14E.) within the Crystal Basin Recreation Area, south of Union Valley Reservoir.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this project is to upgrade the existing heliport infrastructure and construct a new facility at the Pacific Ranger Station to accommodate the National Type I Large Fire Support helicopter and National Type II initial attack helicopter and associated personnel, as well as the occasional helicopter use during El Dorado County Emergency Medical System (EMS) incidents and other municipalities such as Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD).

The Eldorado National Forest does not currently have an adequate facility to support the personnel and equipment needs for the daily management of the Type I and Type 2 fire suppression helicopters. There is existing infrastructure at the Pacific Heliport, including two Type II helicopter landing pads, access road, wind sock, overhead lighting, night landing lights for EMS operations, and a small travel trailer for office space. The existing facilities do not meet the standards needed to support the Forest Service helicopter operations, as well as the occasional use of the heliport for El Dorado County EMS incidents and other municipalities. The current size of the heliport is not adequate, the condition of the asphalt landing pad is rapidly deteriorating, and a suitable office with basic utilities to house personnel does not currently exist at the site.

The office at the Big Hill Heliport is in disrepair and is too small to support the personnel and equipment needs for the daily management of the Type I and Type 2 fire suppression helicopters. There is a need to demolish and remove the old helitack office building infrastructure because it is no longer needed and to reduce overall maintenance costs.

The Eldorado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) goals and objectives for Facilities are:

- Build and maintain fire and other facilities to serve resources, and support program needs. Make them functional, energy efficient, and attractive to the public.
- Remove or replace unsafe, obsolete facilities.

There is a need to build a facility to support Type 1 and Type 2 fire suppression helicopters on the Pacific Ranger District and to remove obsolete facilities located at Big Hill.

Public Involvement

The Pacific Heliport Reconstruction Project has been listed in the Eldorado National Forest Schedule of Proposed Actions (SOPA) since January, 2012. A letter announcing a community meeting to discuss this proposal, dated April 2, 2012 was distributed to 25 local residences near the Pacific Ranger Station compound and White Meadows area. The community meeting was held at the Pacific Ranger Station on April 16, 2012. Seven residents attended the meeting and site visit, and expressed general support of the proposal. No important issues were raised.

Proposed Action

The proposed action is to construct a permanent office facility, storage building, and expand the current size of the Pacific Heliport. The project activities will occur on the Pacific Ranger Station compound, within and immediately adjacent to the current heliport location and the bone yard (nw ¼ section 34, T.11N., R.13E.). In addition, the proposed action also includes demolition of the old helitack office building at Big Hill (ne ¼, se ¼ section 33, T.12.N., R.14E.) which is in disrepair and would no longer be needed. The total project area encompasses approximately 6 acres. See map in Appendix A.

Facilities

Pacific Heliport – Permanent Office Facilities and Heliport Expansion

The attached site plan sketch (Appendix B) shows the proposed facilities and improvements at the Pacific Heliport; which includes the construction of an approximately 4,000 square foot office building, extension of existing waterlines and electrical utilities, installation of a septic system, designated parking spaces, realignment

of the access road, and expanding the size of the heliport to accommodate three helicopter landing pads. The office building would incorporate energy efficient building design, and may include a photovoltaic array, if feasible.

The heliport will be expanded by moving soil material with a dozer(s), lowering the level of the existing surface by 5 to 8 feet and using the excess material to increase the size of the landing pad. A grading plan will be developed prior to implementation. Excess soil material will be hauled offsite to an approved disposal location. Once the grading is completed, the heliport surface will be paved.

The access road will be realigned and moved approximately 10 feet to the southwest to make room for the new office building and parking. Pull through parking for larger vehicles (i.e. fuel trucks, vehicles with trailers) and designated parking spaces to accommodate approximately 4 passenger vehicles will also be established. The road and designated parking areas will also be paved.

Storage Building

The existing storage building at Big Hill will be moved to the Pacific Ranger Station compound bone yard to provide storage for vehicles and equipment.

Big Hill Helitack Office Decommission

The old helitack office at Big Hill would be demolished using heavy equipment and hauled off to an approved disposal site.

Tree Removal

Tree removal would occur on approximately 2 acres at the proposed office building and storage building site, and to the north of the heliport for hazard clearance. The trees would be cut and removed to a landing site using ground-based logging equipment. Merchantable material would be sold as saw logs. Some non-merchantable material or slash will be left on site to provide ground cover to stabilize the slopes and encourage natural regeneration. Any excess slash or non-merchantable material would be piled and burned, chipped, or hauled away to an approved disposal site. Stumps that need to be removed would be removed and hauled off to an approved disposal site.

Resource Design Criteria and Protection Measures

Soils and Hydrology

- Implement Best Management Practices (BMPs) outlined in Chapter 10: Water Quality Handbook of the *R5 FHS 2509.22 – Soil and Water Conservation Handbook* (USDA Forest Service 2011), which were designed to protect soil, water, and aquatic resources during the implementation of ground disturbing

activities. Timber Management (12.11), Road Management (12.21), Vegetation Manipulation (12.51), and Watershed Management (12.71) BMPs apply to this project.

- Slash and downed logs would be placed on the disturbed ground, particularly on the slopes and the toe of fill slopes to provide effective ground cover, promote slope stability and infiltration, capture sediment, and slow runoff.

Noxious Weeds

- Equipment would be cleaned prior to entering and before leaving the project site to insure it is free of soil, seeds, vegetative matter, or other debris that could contain weed seeds or propagules.
- To minimize the risk of increasing the existing population of noxious weeds, slash material would be spread on the disturbed ground to provide ground cover and encourage natural regeneration of native plants. If natural regeneration is slow to establish, native plant seed may be spread to encourage reestablishment of native vegetation.

Cultural Resources

- Standard Resource Protection Measures for cultural resources of interest will be implemented when activities are located immediately adjacent to cultural resources (Sierra PA, 2001 Amendment, Attachment B). Two cultural resource sites will be flagged and avoided.
- Should any previously unrecorded cultural resources be encountered during implementation of this project, all work should immediately cease in that area and the District Archeologist notified (work may resume after approval by the District Archeologist).
- The District Archaeologist will be consulted to determine appropriate staging areas for equipment and disposal sites for excess slash, stumps, and fill material.

Environmental Consequences

The environmental impacts that would result from the proposed action are summarized below.

The following documents are incorporated by reference and are available upon request (with the exception of the Heritage Resource Report):

- Biological Evaluation/Biological Assessment for Sensitive Plants for the Pacific Heliport Reconstruction Project. Susan Durham, Botanist, Eldorado National Forest. January 11, 2012.

- Biological Assessment/Evaluation (Wildlife) for the Pacific Heliport Reconstruction Project. Jennifer Ebert, Wildlife Biologist, Recreation Solutions Enterprise Team. April 6, 2012.
- Heritage Resource Report for the Pacific Heliport Reconstruction Project (R2012-05-03-50001). Krista Deal, District Archaeologist, Eldorado National Forest. May 22, 2012.
- Hydrology and Riparian Assessment for the Pacific Heliport Reconstruction Project. Jeff O’Connell, North Zone Hydrologist, Eldorado National Forest, December 14, 2011.
- Management Indicator Species Analysis for the Pacific Heliport Reconstruction Project. Jennifer Ebert, Wildlife Biologist, Recreation Solutions Enterprise Team. April 6, 2012.
- Noxious Weed Risk Assessment for the Pacific Heliport Reconstruction Project. Susan Durham, Botanist, Eldorado National Forest. January 11, 2012.

Effects Relative to Finding of No Significance (FONSI) Elements

In 1978, the Council on Environmental Quality published regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). These regulations (40 CFR Parts 1500-1508) include a definition of “significant” as used in NEPA. The ten elements of this definition are critical to reducing paperwork through use of a finding of no significant impact (FONSI) when an action would not have a significant effect on the human environment, and is therefore exempt from requirements to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS). Significance as used in NEPA requires consideration of the following ten intensity factors in the appropriate context for that factor.

(1) Beneficial and adverse impacts.

Design criteria and management requirements designed to reduce the potential for adverse impacts were incorporated into the proposed action.

All analyses prepared in support of this document considered both beneficial and adverse effects of the proposed action; however, beneficial effects were not used to offset or compensate for adverse effects in the analyses. None of the potential effects of the proposed action would be significant, even when considered separately from the beneficial effects that occur in conjunction with those effects.

Watershed and Riparian Areas

The project is located within the South Fork American River-Fresh Pond Ravine 7th field watershed. The project is located approximately 750 linear feet south of the South Fork American River. Unnamed ephemeral drainages, topographic swales, and intermittent tributary drainages to the South Fork American River are adjacent to the project area, but are not within the area of influence. Given the proximity of the proposed activities to adjacent hydrologic features and the minimal amount of proposed new ground disturbance that would occur outside of the previously disturbed footprint (approximately 2 acres of proposed timber removal), the likelihood of sediment and contaminant delivery to these hydrologic features is negligible.

Wildlife

The Biological Assessment/Evaluation for the Pacific Heliport Reconstruction Project identified one Forest Service sensitive wildlife species that has the potential to be affected by the proposed action. Spotted owl protected activity center ELD009 is located on the Pacific Ranger District compound and within the project area. The project would affect less than 2 acres of marginally forested habitat along the edge of the Pacific Heliport and in the bone yard area. Because of the proximity to this administrative site, residential houses, Highway 50, the disturbance related to these features, and the marginal habitat along the fringes of the administrative site, the project would have negligible potential effects to suitable habitat. It was determined that the proposed action may affect individuals, but is not likely to result in a trend towards federal listing or loss of viability for the California spotted owl. There would be no affect to other Forest Service sensitive species that have the potential to occur on the Eldorado National Forest.

Plants and Noxious Weeds

The Biological Evaluation and Assessment for Sensitive Plants for the Pacific Heliport Reconstruction Project (Durham 2012) concluded that there were no Forest Service sensitive (PTES) plant species within the project area, nor was suitable habitat present. Therefore, there would be no affect to Forest Service sensitive plant species.

Invasive plant species are present within the project area, primarily at the previously disturbed sites. These include yellow starthistle (Priority 1 invasive plant species), Himalayan Blackberry (Priority 3), Klamathweed (Priority 3), bull thistle (Priority 3), and perennial sweet pea (Priority 3). Resource protection measures incorporated into the proposed action, including equipment cleaning requirements and providing ground cover, will minimize the risk of spreading noxious weeds to new areas. The risk of spreading weeds as a result of the project is moderate.

(2) The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.

Implementation of the proposed action would be governed by standard public health and safety contract clauses. Safety measures including signs and traffic control devices would be put in place to ensure safe traffic flow through the Pacific Ranger District compound. The construction sites are within the administrative areas on the Pacific Ranger District compound, separate from the public areas. The construction sites would be adequately marked and would be closed to public entry. Only authorized Forest Service personnel and contractors would enter the construction site. The risk to public health or safety would be minimized through standard safety procedures.

This project would upgrade the existing heliport infrastructure to meet the facility standards needed to support wildland fire suppression activities and EMS incidents, which will benefit public safety by having this resource available in the local area.

(3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, parklands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

There are no parklands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas within the project area.

Historic and Cultural Resources

Protection of cultural resources has been incorporated into the proposed action, and will follow the stipulations in the October 1996 Programmatic Agreement among the U.S.D.A. Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Region, the California State Historic Preservation Officer, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation regarding the identification, evaluation, and treatment of historic properties managed by the National Forests of the Sierra Nevada, California (Sierra PA), including the interim protocols outlined in Stipulation XIV of the Sierra PA. Details regarding archaeological surveys and management recommendations for heritage resources sites, including specific site-by-site protective measures, are outlined in the Heritage Resource Report for this project (and are summarized above). By following these procedures, there will be no effect to cultural resources from implementing the proposed action (R2012-05-03-50001, with supplements).

(4) The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

Based on comments from the local residents and the analysis of effects from the interdisciplinary team, there is no public controversy concerning effects on the quality of

the human environment from implementing the proposed action. The project would occur at the Pacific Ranger District compound, and the Pacific Heliport has served as the staging area for the Type II helicopter and associated personnel during the past two summers. Local residents have not expressed any concern with the helicopter operations at the Pacific Ranger District compound.

(5) Degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

Local expertise in implementation of these types of projects minimizes the chance of highly uncertain effects or effects which involve unique or unknown risks. Proposed activities are routine in nature, employing standard practices and protection measures, and their effects are generally well known.

(6) The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

The Pacific Heliport Reconstruction project represents a site-specific project that does not set precedence for future decisions with significant effects or present a decision in principle about future considerations. Any future decisions would require a site-specific analysis to consider all relevant scientific and site-specific information available at that time.

(7) Whether this action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts

A cumulative effect is the consequence on the environment that results from the incremental effect of the action when added to the effects of other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions, regardless of what agency or person undertakes the other actions and regardless of land ownership on which the actions occur. Resource specialists considered cumulative effects when conducting the effects analysis in the specialist report. None of the resource specialists found the potential for significant adverse cumulative effects (O'Connell 2011, Deal 2012, Durham 2012, Ebert 2012). Activities associated with the proposed action are not related to other actions with significant cumulative impacts and none of the alternatives are a component part of any larger action.

The risk of cumulative watershed effects (CWE) is assessed using the Equivalent Roaded Acre (ERA). At this time the South Fork American River – Fresh Pond Ravine 7th field watershed has an Equivalent Roaded Acres (ERA) value of 657 which represents

approximately 9.3% of the watershed and 93% of the established Threshold of Concern (TOC). Based on these figures, this watershed currently has a high risk of cumulative watershed effects (Hydrology and Riparian Assessment, Appendix A). However, given the minor amount of new ground disturbance proposed (approximately 2 acres of proposed timber removal), the proposed activities would have a negligible impact on the watershed ERA value and thus would not contribute to measurable cumulative watershed effects (O'Connell 2011).

(8) The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

It was determined that there would be no effect to cultural resources from implementing this project (R2012-05-03-50001), and the proposed action does not adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. As documented in the cultural resource report for this project (R2012-05-03-50001, with supplements), the entire project area has been surveyed. Of the six sites known to be located within or immediately adjacent to the proposed project, only two are at risk of impact during project activities (05-03-56-545 and portions of 05-03-55-376); both of these sites are at the Pacific Ranger Station compound. This includes the old access road to Dr. Parkinson's house (05-03-56-545), which will be flagged prior to project operations for avoidance for any stockpiles or equipment staging. The unpaved segment of Johnson's Cutoff Wagon Road (05-03-55-376) that enters the District compound between residences 1008 and 1007 (where it intersects the paved road to the heliport) will likewise be flagged for avoidance prior to project operations.

The proposed action would not cause loss or destruction of significant, scientific, cultural, or historical resources (Deal 2012).

(9) The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

There are no federally listed threatened or endangered wildlife or plant species or designated critical habitat within the project area. There would be no effect to federally listed threatened or endangered wildlife or plant species or critical habitat from implementation of the proposed action (Durham 2012, Ebert 2012).

(10) Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

The proposed action would not threaten a violation of Federal, State, or local law, or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. The proposed action is consistent with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), National Forest Management Act (NFMA), Endangered Species Act (ESA), Clean Water Act, and the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). The proposed action is fully consistent with the Eldorado National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (USDA Forest Service 1989), as amended by the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment (USDA Forest Service 2004). The proposed action would also be compliant with NFMA provisions for management indicator species (MIS). The project level MIS Report determined that activities within the project area would not alter existing trends in habitat, nor would it lead to a change in distribution of MIS across the Sierra Nevada bioregion (Ebert 2012b).

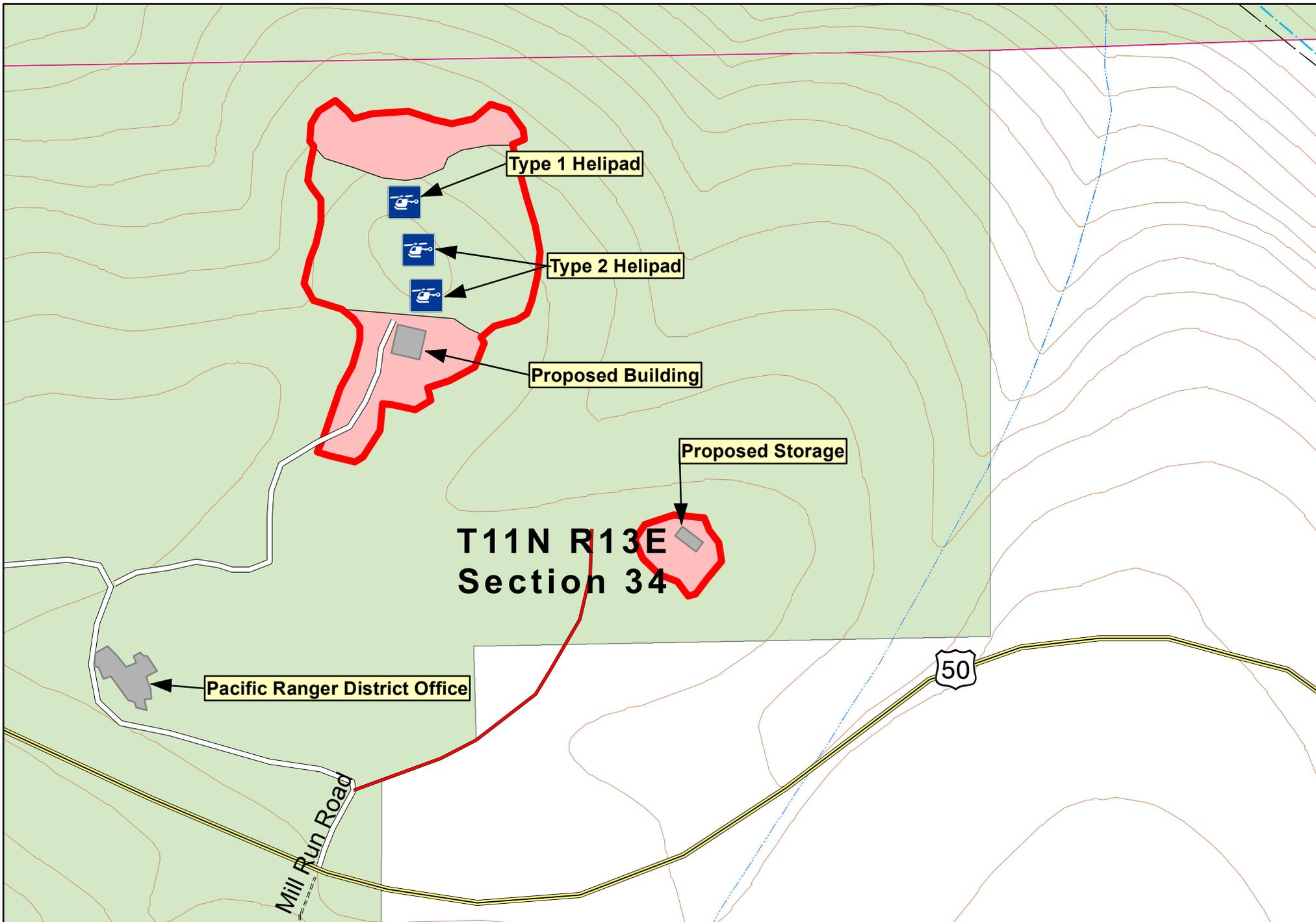
References Cited

- Deal, Krista. 2012. Heritage Resources Report for the Pacific Heliport Reconstruction Project. Pollock Pines, CA: Pacific Ranger District, Eldorado National Forest, Pacific Southwest Region, Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.
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- Ebert, Jennifer. 2012. Biological Evaluation and Assessment and MIS Analysis for the Pacific Heliport Reconstruction Project. Pollock Pines, CA: Recreation Solutions Enterprise Team, Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.
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USDA Forest Service. 2004. Sierra Nevada Forest Plan Amendment, Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision. Pacific Southwest Region, Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

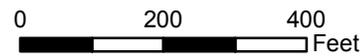
Appendix A

Project Map



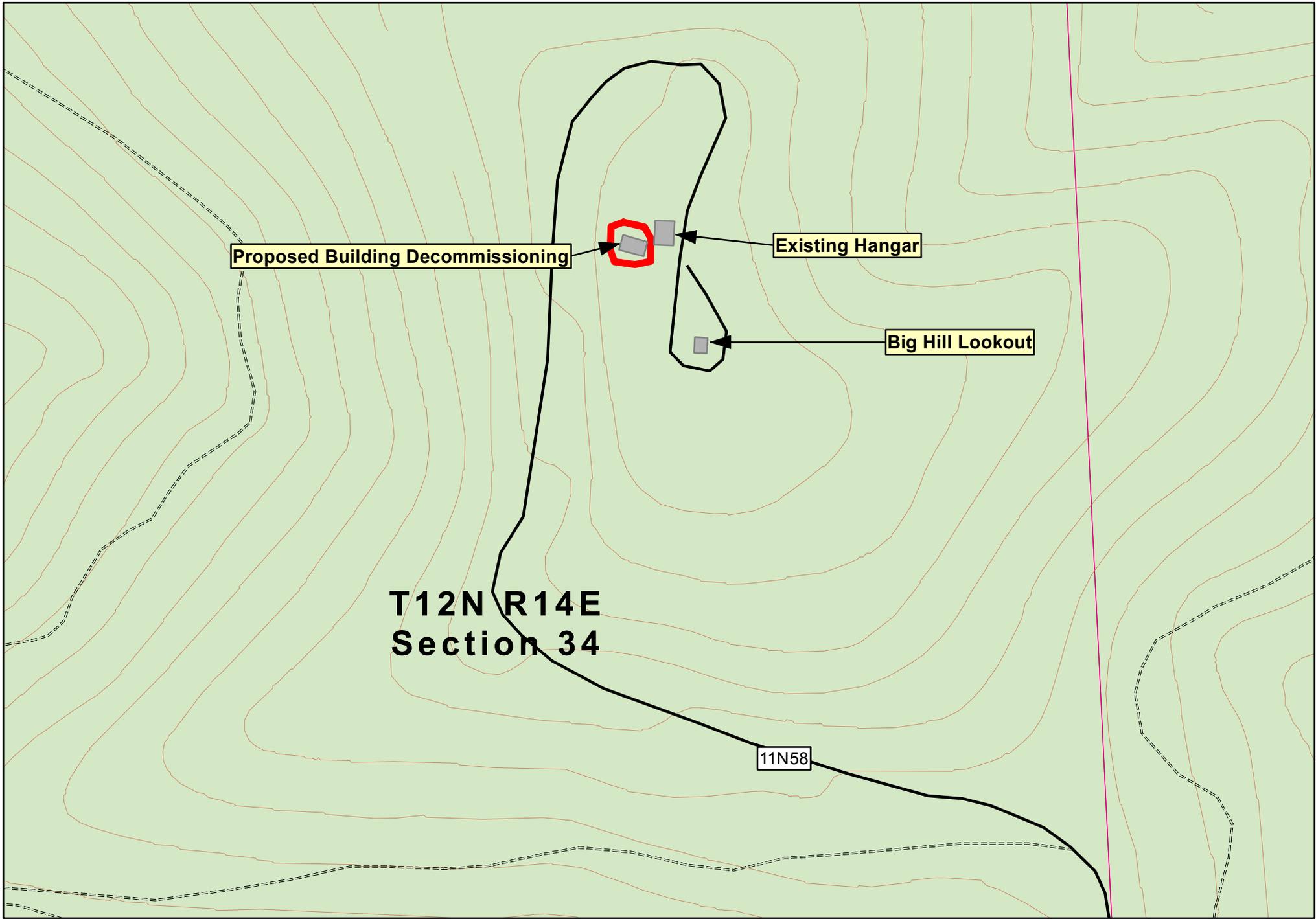
**Pacific Heliport
Reconstruction Project**
5/8/2012

- Project Boundary
- Non-National Forest
- Tree Removal Boundary
- Eldorado National Forest

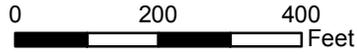


**Note: Buildings and helipads are not to scale. Locations are approximate.*





- Project Boundary
- Non-National Forest
- Tree Removal Boundary
- Eldorado National Forest



**Note: Buildings and helipads are not to scale. Locations are approximate.*

Appendix B

Pacific Heliport Site Plan



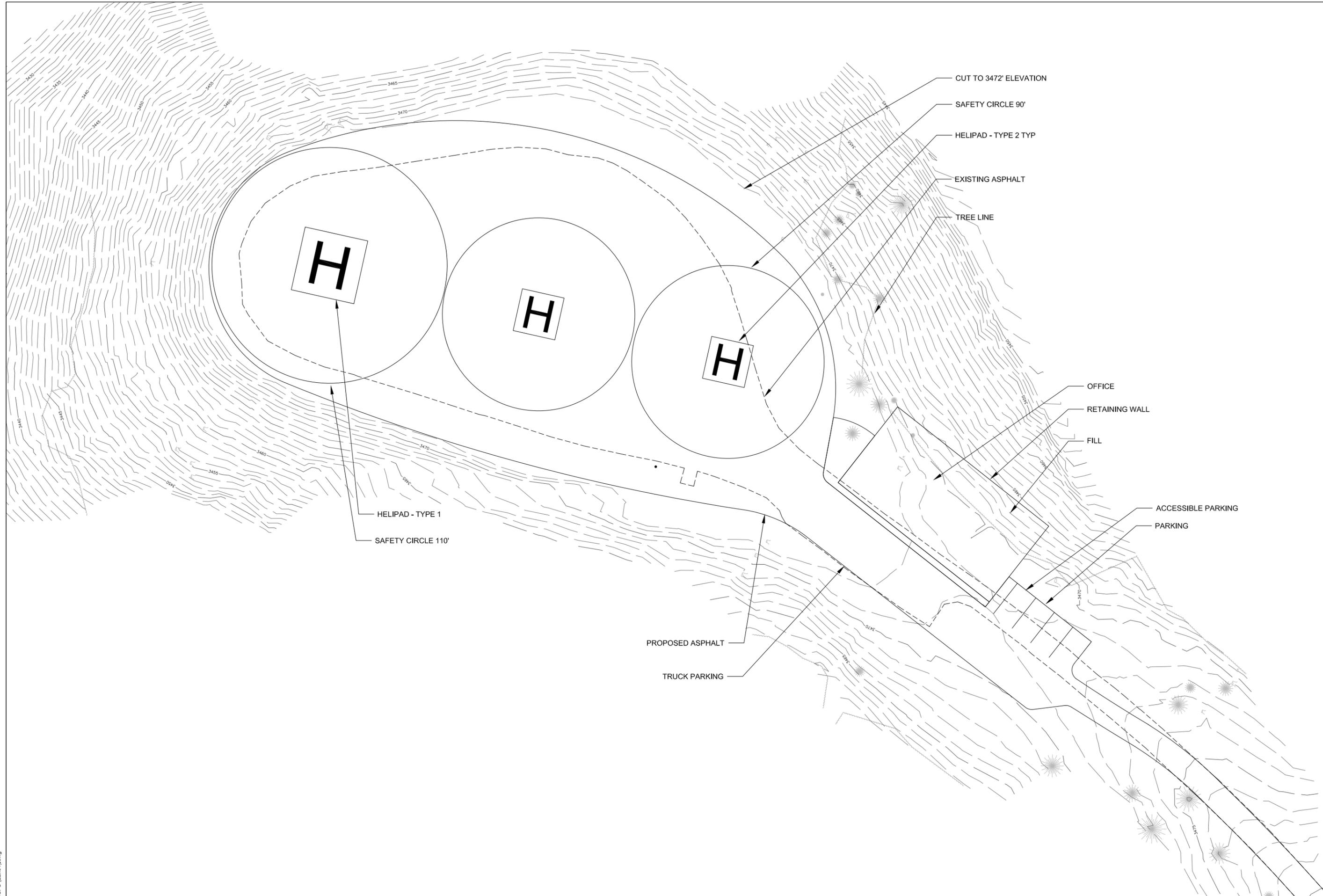
03/07/10 REVISIONS

NO.	DATE	REVISIONS

FOREST: ELDERADO NATIONAL FOREST
PROJECT NAME: HELIBASE IMPROVEMENTS
DRAWING NAME: PACIFIC HELIBASE LAYOUT

PROJECT NO: -
DESIGNED BY: IS
CHECKED BY:
DRAWN BY: IS
SCALE: 1"=20'
DATE: 01/05/2012

DRAWING
D
SHEET 01 OF 01



CUT TO 3472' ELEVATION

SAFETY CIRCLE 90'

HELIPAD - TYPE 2 TYP

EXISTING ASPHALT

TREE LINE

OFFICE

RETAINING WALL

FILL

ACCESSIBLE PARKING

PARKING

HELIPAD - TYPE 1

SAFETY CIRCLE 110'

PROPOSED ASPHALT

TRUCK PARKING