ARLINGTON, Va.—On Wednesday, the Strategic Environmental Research Development Program scientific advisory board approved a $1.7 million proposal to study ways to restore tropical dry forests where military training is conducted in Hawaii and other Pacific Islands.

The Strategic Environmental Research Development Program is a part of the Department of Defense and funds projects addressing the environmental impact of military operations.

Research scientists with the U.S. Forest Service’s Institute of Pacific Islands Forestry, Carnegie Institution and University of Puerto Rico will now work with Department of Defense land managers to conduct the four-year study on the Big Island’s Pohakuloa Training Area.

The 108,863-acre Army training area is the largest Department of Defense site in Hawaii, and is located near the center of the island between the Mauna Loa, Mauna Kea and Hualalai Volcanic Mountains.

Tropical dry forests like the one in the Pohakuloa Training Area are the most widely distributed forest type in Hawaii. But, they are also the most degraded and endangered ecosystems in the Pacific.

This project presents a unique opportunity for scientists because the area is a designated conservation district and few studies have been conducted on successful restoration practices in these ecosystems. Their conclusions can be used to restore similar tropical dry forests in Hawaii, Guam, Palau, Rota, Tinian, Saipan and Yap.

Agriculture production, grazing, military activities and logging in Hawaii have often resulted in decreased biological diversity and a shift from dry forests to non-native invasive grasses that feed wildland fires.

Plant ecologists involved with the project will use satellite technology to develop high-resolution ecosystem maps they can compare to historical data to see how past activity has altered the landscape. They will then know the current condition of the forest and potential for restoring it.

“Breaking the invasive species/wildland fire cycle is among the greatest challenges facing Department of Defense land managers and researchers in the Pacific,” said Dr. Susan Cordell, an Institute of Pacific Islands Forestry scientist. “We hope to provide concrete, practical information to restore remaining Hawaiian dry forests.”

The Strategic Environmental Research and Development Program scientific advisory board also approved a $1.7 million award on Wednesday for a study combining the expertise of research scientists with the U.S. Forest Service and University of California at Riverside who will measure the smoke impact of controlled burns occurring on military training sites in California and Arizona.

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