SCOPING DOCUMENT
EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS
FIRE MANAGEMENT PLAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

INTRODUCTION

The Department of the Interior requires that every area with burnable vegetation have an approved Fire Management Plan (FMP) that describes actions to prepare for and respond to a wildfire (fire suppression), to plan and conduct prescribed fires, and to complete other fire management business.

Planning Process for the FMP Environmental Assessment

The Eastern Massachusetts Fire Management Group, which includes the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and the Department of Defense (DoD), has begun the planning process to prepare a Fire Management Plan which will be done in a Geospatial representation and will include an Environmental Assessment (FMP/EA) that will analyze various treatment methods (such as prescribed fire, mechanical, and chemical) to achieve fire management objectives for the following units located in Eastern Massachusetts:

FWS Units

- Assabet River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR)
- Great Meadows NWR
- Mashpee NWR
- Massasoit NWR
- Monomoy NWR
- Nantucket NWR
- Nomans Land NWR
- Oxbow NWR
- Parker River NWR
- North Attleboro National Fish Hatchery

DoD Unit

- Massachusetts Military Reservation
- Fort Devens Military Reservation
- Other DOD parcels (U.S. Army Reserve Center, South Weymouth Naval Air, Hanscom Air Base)

BIA Unit

- Wampanoag-Aquinnah Tribe Trust Lands

The environmental assessment process will be conducted in accordance with Council on Environmental Quality regulations for implementing the *National Environmental Policy Act* (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 1500).

Public Scoping Process

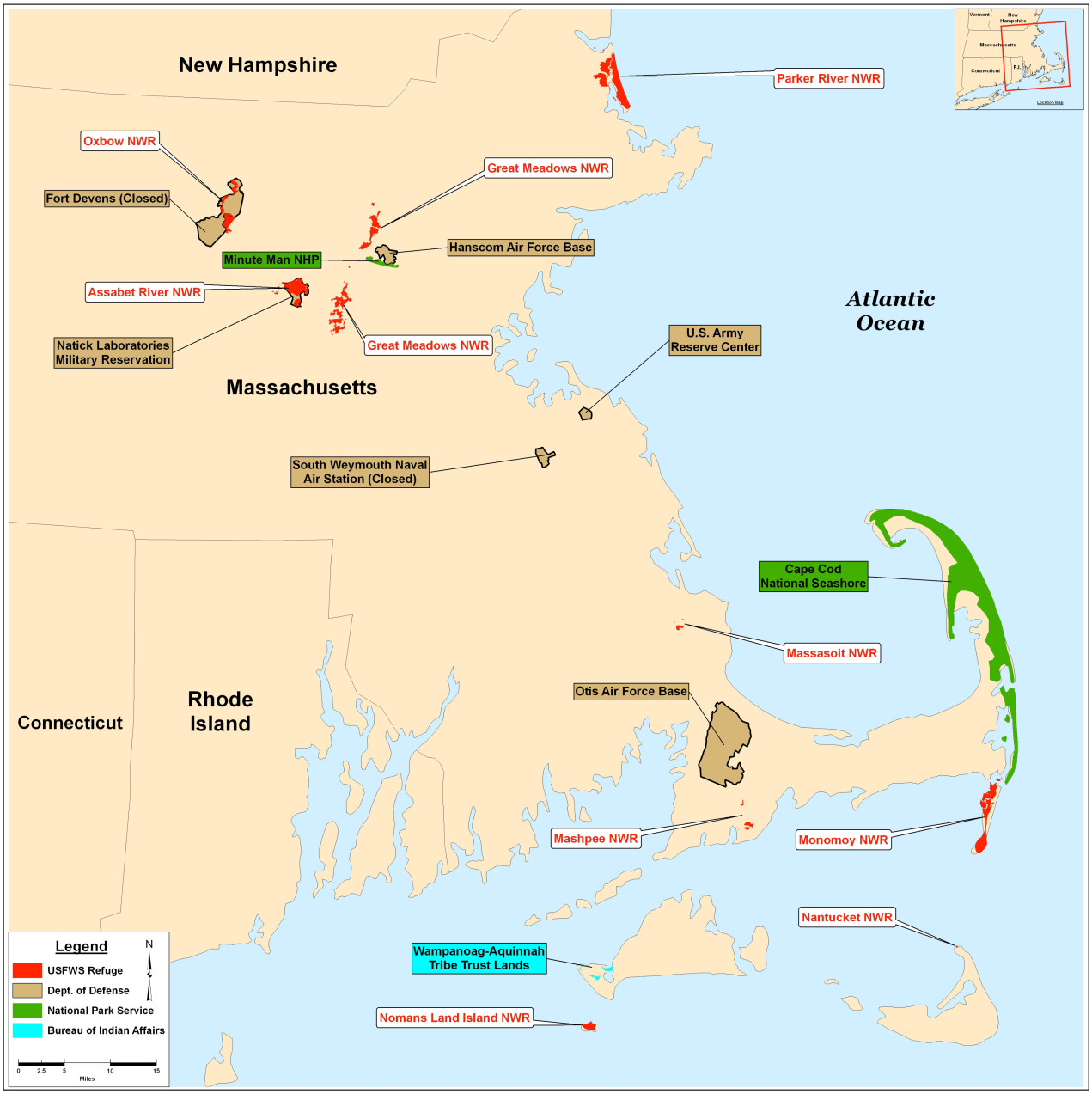
The scoping process is an opportunity for people to read about the proposed alternatives that will be analyzed in the FMP/EA and to provide feedback about any concerns or suggestions for the FMP/EA. The scoping process assists people in understanding relevant issues that have been identified during an environmental analysis, and in developing alternatives that adequately meet the needs of the program. Note that NPS lands are not a part of this scoping process at this time, since they have completed already their Environmental Assessment.

With this document, the purpose and need for proposed fire management actions are addressed as three preliminary alternatives for implementing the Eastern Massachusetts FMP. You are encouraged to submit comments about the information contained in this Scoping Document. Please be as specific as possible with your comments and concerns to make them most useful for the planning and environmental analysis process.

Once the FMP/EA is finalized and an alternative is chosen, that selected alternative will become the final direction for the Eastern Massachusetts FMP. The FMP will be reviewed annually to ensure that it contains the most current information based on monitoring and evaluation by the units involved.

OVERVIEW OF THE EASTERN MASSACHUSETTS GROUP

Figure 1. Locations of the units in the Eastern Massachusetts Group



FMP/EA GOAL AND MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES (COMMON TO ALL)

Environmental Assessment Goal

The overall goal of the FMP/EA is to present an ecosystem-based approach — an environmental management approach that recognizes the full array of interactions within an ecosystem, including humans, rather than

considering single issues, species, or ecosystem services in isolation — for protecting resources within the units of the Eastern Massachusetts Fire Management Group.

Purpose and Need for Fire Management Actions

There are two principle goals common to the agencies comprising the Eastern Massachusetts Fire Management Group.

1. Protect life, property, human improvements, and cultural resources from the threat of wildland fire through prevention, education, mitigation, and restoration actions on and adjacent to the Eastern Massachusetts units

2. Protect, restore, and maintain the ecological integrity of native biological communities by using prescribed fire (planned ignitions), wildfire (unplanned ignitions), and mechanical and chemical treatment methods to support a diversity of wildlife occurring on and near the Eastern Massachusetts units.

Our primary role is the protection of life, trust resources, such as wildlife and its habitat and tribal lands, along with infrastructure and other values at risk. A secondary role is to increase the habitat viability for wildlife and or further protection by reducing or modifying vegetation, establishing barriers to uncontrolled fire spread, and raising awareness through good prevention programs that target unwanted human ignitions. We also stride to work with all partners to do what is right at a landscape level rather than focusing individually on smaller units.

THE PROPOSED ALTERNATIVES

The CEQ regulations for implementing NEPA require federal agencies to rigorously explore and objectively evaluate all reasonable alternatives and to briefly discuss the reasons for eliminating any alternatives that were not developed in detail (40 CFR 1502.14). The three alternatives being proposed for the FMP/EA are:

Alternative A: No Action—Continue Current Level of Fire Management (Prescribed Fire, Chemical, and Mechanical Treatments, and Fire Suppression)

Alternative B: Fire Suppression Only (a reduced program)

Alternative C: Prescribed Fire Treatments, Chemical and Mechanical (an increase in the program) and Fire Suppression

Treatment strategies

The use of prescribed fire, mechanical, and/or chemical treatments is based on management objectives for the area, along with costs, availability of workforce, and time to implement. Several other local factors and agency specific requirement may also be involved. In general, prescribed fire is used as a natural mechanism of disturbance that promotes a healthy ecosystem. Prescribed fire may also be used to reduce hazardous fuel loadings either singly or in conjunction with mechanical treatments. Mechanical treatments provide a means of removing large amounts of fuel loading that would either be unfeasible to accomplish with fire alone, due to the severity and inability to control such a fire, or due to environmental constraints that would pose a risk to human health. Chemical treatments are often used as follow-up treatments to mechanical or prescribed fire projects to treat remaining vegetation or to treat site-specific areas where mechanical treatment is unwarranted.

Description of Methods Used to Meet Treatment Objectives

Prescribed Fire: Prescribed fire is a management tool used to manipulate vegetation. Prescribed fires may be loosely classified as broadcast, in which fire is applied across the landscape, or as debris burning involving small piles within a controlled space. Currently, broadcast burns may range from as little as 5 acres to 500+ acres, depending on agency specific management objectives. Burning may be conducted year-round, typically done in the spring and fall, with some late summer burns possible.

Mechanical Treatments: Mechanical treatments are implemented using hand-held tools, chain saws, excavators, forestry cutters, chippers, and other specialty equipment. Mechanical treatments have ranged from less than 1 acre to 500 acres or more as the existing management direction. Not all agencies will treat acres on their units mechanically, but the typical reasons for doing so would be to remove heavy concentrations of fuel, to help control invasive species, or simply to develop fuel breaks for protection of high property values at risk. Some mechanical projects will be done to improve habitat for wildlife as well. Mechanical treatments can occur in absence of other tools, e.g. prescribed fire or chemical treatments, but they may also be used in conjunction with chemical and prescribed fire treatments as part of the overall treatment process.

Chemical Treatments: Some of the units may use chemicals mostly to treat invasive plant species, federally and state-listed noxious plant species and to restore and maintain native habitats. All units that implement chemical treatments must prepare an annual Pesticide Use Proposal (PUP) that describes the chemical (for example, herbicide, insecticide, or rodenticide) that is proposed for use. The FMP/EA will include an analysis of effects of using chemical treatments.

Wildfire Suppression: Suppression actions may include the construction of fireline by firefighters using hand tools, engines, heavy equipment (such as dozers), and aircraft. Some suppression may be restricted based on the presence of cultural sites, riparian habitat, waterways, and critical habitat. Tactics such as burning out from roadways or allowing the fire to burn into areas of natural confinement may be appropriate as well. Some refuges may have special constraints regarding suppression actions such as the presence of Unexploded Ordnance (UXO). All wildfires will receive a suppression response and federal wildland fire policy gives fire managers latitude to determine and implement an appropriate level of response.

Alternative A: No Action—Continue Current Level of Fire Management

<u>Proposed Management Actions to Meet Objectives</u>

1. Fuel breaks would continue to be constructed and maintained to protect urban interface with agency boundaries. Particular focus would be to reduce fuel hazards associated with pitch pine-scrub oak vegetation.
2. Agencies will continue to coordinate with adjacent landowners to their units removing vegetation that creates or represents a fire hazard, placing life, property, and natural resources at risk.
3. Agencies will continue to coordinate with each other and other adjacent landowners to apply prescribed fire, and carrying out current mechanical, and chemical treatments on a broad, landscape level, and across jurisdictional boundaries.
4. Agencies will continue to protect habitat for federally endangered and State species, and those that may be at risk, such as the New England Cottontail.

5. Our current efforts in maintaining healthy ecosystems, using the various treatment tools we have at our disposal, is based on best management decisions and practices, guided by our current levels of monitoring vegetative responses, and effects on wildlife other environmental impacts.
6. Mechanical and chemical treatments would continue to be used to control nonnative invasive plant species.

Alternative B: Suppression Only (reduction in program)

All agencies are required to make a suppression response to each and every wildfire on their lands, and when possible, share resources to assist with suppression responses in support of other agencies efforts to prevent losses from wildfire. This would be the only requirement that agencies would carry out under Alternative B. No treatments by mechanical, chemical, or prescribed fire would be done. Any efforts to reduce hazard fuels, or restore systems to their natural state would not be done.

Alternative C: Prescribed Fire Treatments, Chemical and Mechanical (increase in program) and Fire Suppression

Alternative C is similar to actions described under Alternative A (current program) except this alternative would realize an increase in project/treatment activity. It could mean additional work for those units already with an active implementation program, but most importantly, this alternative addresses those units where no actions (other than suppression) occur. This would include, Assabet River NWR, Great Meadows NWR, Oxbow NWR, and Parker River NWR. The current program for Mashpee NWR would also further expand to include several partners associated with this refuge unit. Monomoy NWR would expect to more than double its prescribed burn program. Most units look to increase their mechanical treatments, with smaller increase in prescribed fire treatments and occasional application of chemical treatments primarily for invasive species control.

Submitting Comments

The scoping period begins on November 1, 2013, and will end on December 1, 2013 so please submit your comments by Sunday, December 1.

There are two ways to submit comments after your review of this Scoping Document.

Via Email:
Libby_Herland@fws.gov

Via U.S. Postal Service:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Eastern Massachusetts National Wildlife Refuge Complex
73 Weir Hill Road,
Sudbury, MA 01776

Your comments and thoughts are very important and will help shape our course of action as our fire planning efforts proceed.