

News Release



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Study assesses lead-based paint cleanup at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge

Public comments accepted until February 19

A study released today by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service evaluates six alternatives for cleaning up lead-based paint contamination that poses a threat to Laysan albatross chicks at Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, part of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.

The refuge, 1,200 miles north of the Hawaiian Islands, is home to the world's largest Laysan albatross nesting colony, with more than 450,000 breeding pairs.

The Engineering Evaluation/Cost Analysis report released today estimates it will take up to six years to complete the clean-up of lead-based paint from and around 86 buildings and cost \$8 million to \$12 million, depending on which alternative is selected. The recommended clean-up proposes to reduce lead levels in the soil to no more than 75 parts per million (ppm). Studies have shown that lead levels in the soil around affected buildings can be as high as 9,300 ppm.

Some of the buildings on the refuge date to 1903, with most of them dating to the period between 1939 and 1993, when the atoll was used as a U.S. Navy base. Hundreds of buildings were constructed on two of the atoll's islands – Eastern and Sand – during the era. Buildings remain only on Sand Island.

“Unfortunately, lead-based paint was used on most of the buildings, and high levels of lead-based paint are still found on buildings and in soil surrounding them,” said Tom Edgerton, Superintendent of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. “This poses an unnecessary risk to the refuge's Laysan albatross colony, with as many as 10,000 chicks, or up to 3 percent of the hatchlings, dying from lead poisoning each year.”

The report released today lays out six alternatives for cleaning up the buildings, which include former officers' quarters, single family residences and shop buildings, among others. The preferred alternative calls for removing lead-based paint and/or asbestos siding from the buildings, “encapsulating” the buildings by repainting them with safe paint, excavating contaminated soils, and installing a soil barrier and cap. Six buildings in serious disrepair would be demolished. The contaminated soil and demolition debris would be stabilized by mixing them with cement or other solidifying material to form concrete monoliths, which would be stored in a consolidation unit on the refuge.

Studies conducted by the Service and others between the late 1980s and 2009 showed that Laysan albatross chicks exhibited symptoms of lead toxicity, which causes their wings to droop and prevents them from developing the ability to fly and forage for food, leading to death. The studies found their exposure is likely related to ingestions of lead-based paint chips and soil contaminated with the chips, which the birds often pick up and place into their nests. One study estimated that eliminating the chick mortality from lead poisoning would increase the Laysan population at Midway in 50 years by as many as 360,000 birds over the projected population size without lead-based paint removal.

While 17 other species of birds also nest on the island, lead-based paint impacts are focused on Laysan albatross chicks due to the species' behavior and their tendency to nest close to buildings.

The Service already has cleaned up lead-based paint from 24 buildings, at a cost of more than \$842,000, and taken numerous other actions to improve the survival of Laysan albatross adults and chicks and other birds and wildlife on the refuge. Rats, which pose a problem to ground-nesting birds, were eradicated from Midway 1996. Invasive plants such as *Verbesina encelioides* are being controlled, opening up large areas to albatross nesting and reducing chick mortality. Above-ground power lines and other structures – significant hazards to flying adults – have been put under ground or removed, and entrapment hazards, such as fencing and abandoned sewage tunnels, have been removed. Drainage ditches have been dug to reduce flooding of nests from heavy rains.

The full Engineering Evaluation/Cost Analysis report on lead-based paint removal can be found at <http://www.fws.gov/midway/lpa.html>. Hard copies of the report are available at the FWS Division of Engineering, Region 1, 911 NE 11th Avenue, Portland, Oregon 97232 and at the FWS Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument office, 300 Ala Moana Blvd., Honolulu, Hawai'i 96850.

Comments must be received or postmarked by February 19, 2011. The Service is particularly seeking comments for:

- The proposed clean-up level of 75 ppm for lead in the soil (Appendix C, Streamlined Risk Evaluation in Midway EE/CA Report);
- Schedule and clean-up priorities, as the Service will not be able to respond to the entire site in the first year of clean-up (removal actions are expected to take up to six years to complete);
- The removal of six historic buildings (Sections 8.1 and 8.2 in the report).

Please submit written comments to Carlton Morris, FWS Project Manager, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Engineering, 911 NE 11th Avenue, Portland, OR 97232 or email carlton_morris@fws.gov.

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