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STAFF REPORT: REGULAR CALENDAR

Consistency Determination No.: CD-0008-17

Federal Agency: U.S. Forest Service

Location: Ridgelines along the eastern edge of the coastal zone boundary in the Big Sur region of the Monterey Ranger District, Los Padres National Forest, Monterey County ([Exhibits 1 and 2](#)).

Project Description: Strategic Community Fuelbreak Improvement Project to re-establish and maintain approximately 13.7 miles of historically used fuelbreaks on strategic ridgelines in the wildland urban interface.

Staff Recommendation: Concurrence

SUMMARY OF STAFF RECOMMENDATION

The U.S. Forest Service has submitted a consistency determination for the re-establishment and maintenance of nine historically used fuelbreaks on strategic ridgelines adjacent to the eastern edge of the coastal zone in the Monterey Ranger District in the northern Big Sur region of the National Forest. The proposed fuelbreaks are located on National Forest lands and therefore excluded from the coastal zone. However, the consistency determination submitted by the Forest

Service analyzes potential effects on uses and resources within the coastal zone. The Forest Service states that the project purpose is to limit the spread of wildfire on the National Forest by providing strategic and tactical advantages for ground-based and aerial firefighting personnel and equipment. The Commission has previously concurred with consistency and negative determinations submitted by the Forest Service in part for fuelbreak projects in the Big Sur region.

Historically, when a wildfire begins in the Monterey District fire suppression efforts focus on a series of geographic ridges with historical firelines that lie strategically between the National Forest and communities at risk in the wildland urban interface. Repeated use of bulldozers to reopen firelines by scraping down to mineral soil and removing all vegetation has resulted in scarring that will eventually alter the capability of these sites to support native vegetation. Re-establishing fuelbreaks will reduce the need to bulldoze firelines along the fuelbreak corridors. Re-establishing the fuelbreaks would include using a combination of manual hand thinning, pile burning or chipping, machine mastication or machine piling for burning, and removal of light and dense brush and small trees. This work would leave a ground cover of grass, forbs, and small shrubs within the fuelbreaks, with the existing overstory left intact. In addition herbicide treatment would be allowed in the seven fuelbreak segments that are located outside of designated wilderness.

The Commission staff has analyzed potential spillover impacts from vegetation clearing in the fuelbreaks on water quality, fisheries, and terrestrial habitat and species. The proposed re-establishment and maintenance of fuelbreaks would not adversely affect these coastal resources. Implementation and maintenance of the proposed project is expected to assist in containing the spread of large wildfires in the region and minimizing the damage to these resources that occurs from catastrophic wildfires. The project includes design, mitigation, and monitoring measures to protect coastal resources. The staff recommends that the Commission find the project consistent with the water quality, environmentally sensitive habitat, soils and timberland, and fire hazard policies of the Coastal Act (Sections 30231, 30240, 30243, and 30253).

The project would not adversely affect public recreation, visual resources, or cultural resources in the coastal zone. The project is expected to assist in containing the spread of large wildfires in the region and minimizing the damage to these coastal resources that occurs from catastrophic wildfires. The project includes design and mitigation measures along with monitoring and adaptive management to ensure that future maintenance of the fuelbreaks will be modified if necessary to protect public recreation, visual resources, and cultural resources in the coastal zone. The staff recommends that the Commission find the project consistent with the public recreation, visual resource, and cultural resource policies of the Coastal Act (Sections 30251, 30210, 30213, 30223, and 30244).

The staff recommends that the Commission **concur** with the U.S. Forest Service's consistency determination CD-0008-17. The motion and resolution are on **Page 4** of this report. The standard of review for this consistency determination is the Chapter 3 policies of the Coastal Act.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. <u>FEDERAL AGENCY’S CONSISTENCY DETERMINATION</u>	4
II. MOTION AND RESOLUTION	4
III. FINDINGS AND DECLARATIONS	4
A. PROJECT DESCRIPTION	4
B. OTHER AGENCY APPROVALS AND CONSULTATIONS	7
C. WILDLAND FIRE HAZARD	8
D. VISUAL RESOURCES AND PUBLIC RECREATION	13
E. CULTURAL RESOURCES	16
 SUBSTANTIVE FILE DOCUMENTS	 18

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1 – Regional Map

Exhibit 2 – Fuelbreak Location Map

Exhibit 3 – Fireline Photograph

Exhibit 4 – Fuelbreak Photograph

Exhibit 5 – Table of Fire History

Exhibit 6 – Project Design Standards

I. FEDERAL AGENCY'S CONSISTENCY DETERMINATION

The U.S. Forest Service has determined the project consistent with the California Coastal Management Program.

II. MOTION AND RESOLUTION

Motion:

I move that the Commission concur with consistency determination CD-0008-17.

Staff recommends a **YES** vote on the motion. Passage of this motion will result in a concurrence in the determination of consistency and adoption of the following resolution and findings. An affirmative vote of a majority of the Commissioners present is required to pass the motion.

Resolution:

The Commission hereby concurs with consistency determination CD-0008-17 by the U.S. Forest Service on the grounds that the project is fully consistent, and thus consistent to the maximum extent practicable, with the enforceable policies of the California Coastal Management Program.

III. FINDINGS AND DECLARATIONS

A. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The U.S. Forest Service proposes to re-establish and maintain approximately 13.7 miles (~350 acres) of historically used fuelbreaks on strategic ridgelines that are within, adjacent to, or straddle the eastern edge of the coastal zone on the Monterey Ranger District in the northern Big Sur region of the Los Padres National Forest, between Mescal Ridge (north of the Little Sur River) and Anderson Peak (northeast of Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park)¹ ([Exhibits 1 and 2](#)). All of the proposed fuelbreaks are located on National Forest lands and therefore excluded from the coastal zone. However, the consistency determination submitted by the Forest Service analyzes potential effects on uses and resources within the adjacent coastal zone areas west of the fuelbreaks.

The Forest Service states in its January 2017 *Draft Environmental Impact Statement* (DEIS) that the purpose of the proposed fuelbreak project is to limit the spread of wildfire on the National Forest by providing strategic and tactical advantages for ground-based and aerial firefighting personnel and equipment:

¹ An additional 10.3 miles of fuelbreak re-establishment on the Monterey Ranger District is not analyzed in the subject consistency determination as these proposed fuelbreaks are located inland of the coastal zone boundary and would not adversely affect coastal resources.

- Fire frequency on the National Forest has significantly increased since 1972 in the ignition-prone areas near the wildland urban interface (WUI), where communities have developed up to the boundary of the National Forest and where improvements are scattered within wildlands.
- Since 2008, 118 homes have been lost to wildfire on the periphery of the Monterey District. The priority for community protection can result in larger fire perimeters as a result of fire-fighting resources providing for structure protection rather than direct suppression action on the fire perimeter.
- Historically, when a wildfire begins on the Monterey District, within or outside of wilderness, fire suppression efforts focus on a series of geographic ridges with historical firelines that lie strategically between the National Forest and communities at risk in the WUI. Repeated use of bulldozers to reopen firelines by scraping down to mineral soil and removing all vegetation has resulted in scarring that will eventually alter the capability of these sites to support native vegetation ([Exhibit 3](#)).
- The current Los Padres National Forest Land Management Plan calls for maintaining the existing system of firebreaks along watershed boundaries, and recognizes the value of fuelbreaks as part of an integrated approach to wildfire suppression by establishing a goal of maintaining 1,000 acres of the existing legacy fuelbreak system annually ([Exhibit 4](#)).

The *DEIS* further states that the proposed fuelbreak re-establishment and maintenance project is necessary because: (1) there is a need for increased wildland fire suppression efficiency near communities and infrastructure; (2) there is a need to reduce the wildfire risk to life and property in the communities of Big Sur, Palo Colorado, Cachagua, and Jamesburg; (3) there is a need for reduced suppression costs within the WUI; and (4) there is a need to minimize adverse impacts from fire suppression activities on the landscape.

The consistency determination and *DEIS* describe the following nine proposed fuelbreak re-establishment and maintenance project corridors on the National Forest, from north to south:

Mescal Ridge. Re-establish a fuelbreak that overlaps the existing Mescal Ridge Road, covering 25 feet north of the road edge to 75 feet south of the adjacent ridge center. The fuelbreak would be a maximum of approximately 300 feet wide by 0.6 miles long (~22.2 acres).

Post Summit to Little Sur River. Re-establish a maximum 150-foot-wide fuelbreak on the historic fireline between Post Summit and the little Sur river, a distance of 1.8 miles (~32.2 acres).

Post Summit to Manuel Peak (Cabezo Prieto). Re-establish a maximum 150-foot-wide fuelbreak on the historic fireline between the National Forest boundary at Post Summit, across Cabezo Prieto ridge, and to where the Mt. Manuel Trial (FDT 2E06) crosses the wilderness boundary in Section 20, a distance of 2.7 miles (~53.9 acres).

Mount Manuel to Big Sur River Wild River Boundary. Re-establish a maximum 150-foot-wide fuelbreak on the historic fireline from where the Mt. Manuel Trail (FDT 2E06) crosses the wilderness boundary in Section 20 to the escarpment above the Big Sur River corridor, a distance of 0.9 miles (~16.3 acres).

North Coast Ridge Road – Terrace Creek Trailhead to Cold Springs. Re-establish a maximum 150-foot-wide fuelbreak along the historic fireline adjacent to or encompassing the North Coast Ridge Road (FDT 2E07) between the Terrace Creek Trailhead and the Cold Springs Road intersection, a distance of 3.5 miles (~62 acres).

Partington Ridge. Re-establish a 150-foot-wide fuelbreak on Partington Ridge adjacent to or encompassing the De Angulo Trail (FDT 2E07) between the North Coast Ridge Road (FDR 20S05) and the National Forest Boundary, a distance of 0.8 miles (~14.3 acres).

North Coast Ridge Road – Cold Springs to Tan Bark Trail. Re-establish a maximum 300-foot-wide fuelbreak along the historic fireline adjacent to or encompassing the North Coast Ridge Road (FDR 20S05) between Cold Springs Road intersection and the historic Tan Bark Trail, a distance of 1.5 miles (~52.5 acres).

Tan Bark Trail. Re-establish a fuelbreak encompassing the Tan Bark Trail between the North Coast Ridge Road (FDR 20S05) and west to the National Forest Boundary, a distance of 0.8 miles (~16 acres). Commencing at the North Coast Ridge Road and traveling west towards the National Forest boundary, the first 600 feet in length will be a maximum of 300 feet wide. The remaining length of the fuelbreak, extending to the forest boundary, will be a maximum of 150 feet wide.

North Coast Ridge Road – Tan Bark Trail to Anderson Peak. Re-establish a maximum 150-foot-wide fuelbreak along the historic fireline adjacent to or encompassing the North Coast Ridge Road (FDR 20S05) between the historic Tan Bark Trail and Anderson peak at the Wilderness Boundary, a distance of 1.1 miles (~19.1 acres).

The consistency determination states that the proposed fuelbreaks will be located within the same footprints that have been used repeatedly since 1972.² Re-establishing and maintaining the fuelbreak system would include using a combination of manually hand thinning, piling and pile burning or chipping, machine mastication or machine piling for burning, and removal of medium (light brush and small trees) and heavy (dense brush) fuels. This work would leave a vegetative ground cover of grass, forbs, and small shrubs within the fuelbreaks, with the existing overstory

² The DEIS states that during the summer of 2016, 10.3 miles of the proposed 13.7 miles of fuelbreaks included in this consistency determination were reopened to mineral soil as emergency firelines by bulldozers and were used in containing the Soberanes Fire. As of October 2016, these firelines were repaired and rehabilitated by pulling and spreading displaced native soil and duff back onto the fireline and installing waterbars to minimize surface erosion.

left intact ([Exhibit 4](#)). In addition, the *DEIS* states that herbicide treatment would be allowed in all the aforementioned proposed fuelbreaks except for the Post Summit to Little Sur River and Mount Manual to Big Sur Wild River Boundary segments, which are located within designated wilderness. The Forest Service states that herbicides could be used on cut shrub stumps to reduce the amount of vegetative regrowth, thereby extending the time between fuelbreak maintenance cycles. Herbicide application would be restricted to low-volume methods such as wipe-on or brush applicators. The project also includes interdisciplinary monitoring activities during and after re-establishment of the fuelbreaks, and provisions for adaptive management measures should monitoring indicate that the fuelbreaks were not used as predicted during future wildfire suppression actions.

The Commission previously concurred with consistency and negative determinations submitted by the Forest Service for fuelbreak projects in the Big Sur region. In CD-006-84 the Forest Service proposed establishment and maintenance of a 19-mile-long fuelbreak (~1755 acres) on the southern end of Coast Ridge between Nacimiento Summit and Willow Creek Road. The project included selective removal of trees and brush, the selective use of herbicides, and the use of mechanized equipment, manual labor, and prescribed fire to create a ridgetop grassland corridor through a brush and timber landscape. In CD-018-88 the Forest Service adopted a Land and Resource Management Plan which directed the agency to take an active role in fire management through the use of prescribed burns and establishment and maintenance of fuelbreaks, in part to protect coastal watersheds. In ND-081-05 the Forest Service updated its Land and Resource Management Plan. The Plan included provisions for: (1) maintenance of existing roadways and fuelbreaks in part to protect Big Sur communities; (2) maintaining and enhancing the ability to suppress wildfires in part through vegetation management; (3) development and maintenance of Wildland Urban Interface defense zones; and (4) reducing the threat and size of large wildfires.

B. OTHER AGENCY APPROVALS AND CONSULTATIONS

NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE

The Forest Service has completed project consultation with the National Marine Fisheries Service under the provisions of the Endangered Species Act.

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

The Forest Service has completed project consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under provisions of the Endangered Species Act.

CENTRAL COAST REGIONAL WATER QUALITY CONTROL BOARD

The Forest Service has entered into a Management Agency Agreement with the State of California that outlines how the Forest Service will implement California's Nonpoint Source Management plan on National Forest lands. The Los Padres National Forest Land Management Plan provides direction consistent with California's nonpoint source management programs.

CALIFORNIA STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

The California State Historic Preservation Officer has delegated authority regarding the National Historic Preservation Act for routine undertakings by the Forest Heritage Program Manager

through the Forest Supervisor and Regional Forester. This delegation is through programmatic agreements dating back to 1995 with the most recent one dated February 6, 2013. Pursuant to the State Historic Preservation Act, inventory, evaluation, and protective measures for areas of potential effects from the fuelbreak project have been completed.

NATIVE AMERICAN TRIBAL CONSULTATION

Tribal government consultation and coordination has been completed by the Forest Service with the Esselen and Salinan Tribes.

C. WILDLAND FIRE HAZARD

Coastal Act Section 30231 states:

The biological productivity and the quality of coastal waters, streams, wetlands, estuaries, and lakes appropriate to maintain optimum populations of marine organisms and for the protection of human health shall be maintained and, where feasible, restored through, among other means, minimizing adverse effects of waste water discharges and entrainment, controlling runoff, preventing depletion of ground water supplies and substantial interference with surface water flow, encouraging waste water reclamation, maintaining natural vegetation buffer areas that protect riparian habitats, and minimizing alteration of natural streams.

Coastal Act Section 30240 states:

- (a) Environmentally sensitive habitat areas shall be protected against any significant disruption of habitat values, and only uses dependent on those resources shall be allowed within those areas.*
- (b) Development in areas adjacent to environmentally sensitive habitat areas and parks and recreation areas shall be sited and designed to prevent impacts which would significantly degrade those areas, and shall be compatible with the continuance of those habitat and recreation areas.*

Coastal Act Section 30243 states in part:

The long-term productivity of soils and timberlands shall be protected . . .

Coastal Act Section 30253 states in part:

New development shall do all of the following:

- (a) Minimize risks to life and property in areas of high geologic, flood, and fire hazard.*

The consistency determination addresses wildfire hazards and history in the Monterey Ranger District:

Conditions for extreme fire behavior can exist during any season on the Los Padres National Forest . . . Notable wildfires that have burned into the WUI on the periphery of the Monterey District include: Molera 1972, Marble Cone 1977, Gorda-Rat Complex 1985, Molera 2 1989, Sur 1996, Kirk Complex 1999, Indians 2008, Basin Complex 2008, and the Pfeiffer 2013. The 2016 Soberanes Fire started outside the National Forest boundary on California State Park lands and quickly spread into the WUI and onto the Monterey Ranger District of the Los Padres National Forest; the same strategic ridge lines proposed herein for fuel breaks kept it contained within National Forest System lands.

The DEIS states that:

The fuel breaks would facilitate wild land fire suppression actions and reinforce defensible locations by providing areas of lower fire intensities, improve firefighter access and enhance fireline production rates. The ridge line locations are the only strategically located geographic ridges that effectively parallel communities at-risk from wildfire originating on the national forest. Each time these locations have been used in fire suppression operations over the past four decades, they were successful in preventing wildfire spread from the national forest into the urban interface. During the summer of 2016, firelines were again constructed in most of these same ridge lines to help contain the Soberanes Fire within the national forest.

The Strategic Community Fuelbreak Improvement Project is an outcome of Firescape Monterey as a way to design and establish fuel breaks in a non-emergency environment to both enhance protection for at-risk communities and preserve wilderness character. Firescape Monterey is a local collaborative effort that has brought together local community members, a diversity of environmental organizations, federal, state, and local governments, and others to help focus and prioritize our fire management practices.

The analysis of impacts in this section (and in Sections D and E, following) is focused on impacts to the Coastal Zone resources. While federal land in the National Forest is considered “excluded from the coastal zone”; the Commission nevertheless typically takes a broad view in determination what resources and uses are considered coastal resources or uses. For example, impacts to coastal recreation on federal land are typically considered coastal related when they are dependent on appreciation of ocean views as part of the coastal experience. Similarly, habitat or water quality impacts on federal land are often considered impacts to coastal resources, because similar habitats are also found in the coastal zone, and streams and rivers flow into the coastal zone.

Wildland fires on the Monterey Ranger District have over the decades taken a toll on lives and property, and have burned hundreds of square miles of timberland, wildlife habitats, watersheds for municipal water supplies, and valuable recreation areas ([Exhibit 5](#)). The proposed re-

establishment and maintenance of fuelbreaks on historic firelines on National Forest lands within the Monterey Ranger District to assist in the control of wildfires could potentially affect coastal zone resources and uses. First, manipulation of vegetation and habitat could affect mobile species that rely on habitat both inside the coastal zone and outside the zone on National Forest lands. Second, manipulation of habitat could affect runoff into the coastal zone and associated riparian habitats, water quality, and fisheries. Third, manipulation of habitat for fire management has the potential to affect fire hazard and behavior in the coastal zone since wildfires do not respect jurisdictional boundaries.

However, the Forest Service believes that the proposed project will help to reduce the severity and spread of wildfires and protect the resources and uses of the coastal zone. The *DEIS* states that project implementation:

. . . would have a dramatic effect in altering the spread and direction of large wildfires by reducing fuel in major fire flow paths (Refer to Appendix E) . . . This network or fuel breaks has reduced large fire size in the past and will also be the case in the future. Reducing the potential for large fires will also reduce the potential for adverse impacts to soil and vegetation resources along the WUI resulting from suppression operations because the fuel breaks are maintained in such a capacity that minimal to little work would need to be done prior to engaging in suppression operations.

The consistency determination addresses the potential impacts to coastal resources:

Alteration to natural sediment erosion is caused by several types of disturbance, including wildfire, roads, trails, and fire suppression lines. Any management activity that reduces those disturbances will congruently reduce soil erosion into the coastal streams and help maintain water quality.

Fire suppression lines are built by bulldozers which scrape the firelines down to mineral soil removing all vegetation. The resulting impacts affect both soil productivity, e.g. by removing the topsoil, and sediment erosion by increasing the amount of soil left unprotected from rain wash. By designing and preparing fuel breaks during a non-emergency environment, the Forest Service is able to maintain a ground cover of grasses, forbs and small shrubs, protecting both the soil resources and prevent sediment regime alteration.

Because the project proposes fuelbreaks only along ridge tops, less than one acre out of the 350 acres of fuelbreaks proposed in this consistency determination (in the Post Summit to Little Sur River fuelbreak) is potentially located within a Riparian Conservation Area (RCA).³ However, the *DEIS* states that this estimate is based on GIS analysis and that it is anticipated that during project implementation field crews would restrict activities within this RCA or avoid the area.

³ Riparian Conservation Areas are land allocations that are managed to maintain or restore the structure and function of aquatic, riparian, and meadow ecosystems.

The consistency determination further addresses potential project impacts on riparian resources and water quality:

In support of the DEIS, a hydrology analysis (Mondry 2016) was prepared to gauge the risk of adverse effects to hydrological function and water quality resulting from implementing the project. The analysis used two resource indicators: risk of sediment regime alteration and risk to Riparian Conservation Area function. The analysis determined that implementation of the project will not alter the sediment regime and there would be no adverse effects to Riparian Conservation Areas. The project is expected to produce beneficial indirect effects to both indicators if the fuel breaks contain a large wildfire.

Regarding potential impacts to fisheries in the coastal zone, the *DEIS* states that proposed project actions would not take place in or near the direct vicinity of stream habitats occupied by anadromous fish, thus direct effects to anadromous fish from hand piling, machine piling, pile burning, mastication, or prescribed burning are not expected to occur. Fines exposed from vegetation removal could be washed downslope into streams during the first rain events. However, the *DEIS* also states that any increase in fines would be short-term, localized, and undetectable from background levels of turbidity and instream fines. Growth of native herbaceous vegetation during the first growing season after re-establishment of the fuelbreaks would reduce the risk of fine surface erosion to stream channels in subsequent years. The *DEIS* concludes that:

Beneficial indirect effects of fuelbreak improvement on watershed scale sediment regimes may be anticipated if the likelihood of containment of potentially large wildfires is increased. Reducing acres of high-severity fire would reduce areas prone to high rates of post-fire erosion and sedimentation.

The reduction of post-fire erosion and sedimentation would reduce potential adverse effects on water quality and fisheries in downstream the coastal zone waters.

The primary concern for direct effect to fish species is the potential for herbicides to enter streams resulting in aquatic species being in direct contact with chemicals. The *DEIS* states that:

It is unlikely with the [ridgetop] treatments proposed that herbicides will reach stream channels. In the event that herbicides enter a stream, it is highly unlikely that it would be at high enough concentrations to affect aquatic biota. Therefore, the probability that direct application of herbicide to stump and stem tissue will result in high enough concentrations of herbicide to enter stream habitats and lead to negative consequences for fish is discountable. Based on this rationale, there will be no direct effects to anadromous fish and their habitat (Smith 2016).

The Forest Service additionally states that the potential for adverse effects on water quality, fisheries, or other coastal resources would be negligible due to the implementation of best management practices and project design standards and the limited and distributed nature of herbicide treatments on ridgetop locations.

The *DEIS* states that a *Biological Assessment* (Johnson 2016) was completed to analyze the potential effects of the fuelbreak project on any threatened, endangered, or proposed listed terrestrial animal and avian species and their critical habitats. The *Assessment* concluded that with project design standards and mitigation measures, and when applied with Los Padres National Forest Land Management Plan restrictions, strategies, and tactics, the project would not adversely affect critical habitat or species that move across National Forest lands in and out of the coastal zone. Downslope watershed lands and wildlife habitats that support species that transit the coastal zone would benefit from the anticipated reduced threat and spread of catastrophic wildfire arising from the proposed fuelbreak project. Appendix A of the *DEIS* provides a list of the Design Standards and Mitigation Measures that will be applied to the proposed project ([Exhibit 6](#)). These include measures regarding botanical resources, riparian conservation areas, hydrology and soils, wildlife, and the use of prescribed fire and herbicides. The Forest Service completed project consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Marine Fisheries Service, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The USFWS concluded that the project would not adversely affect the California condor, Smith's blue butterfly, California red-legged frog or its critical habitat, California tiger salamander, or the marbled murrelet. The NMFS concluded that the project is not likely to adversely affect threatened South-Central California Coast steelhead or its designated critical habitat. The USEPA rated the proposed project as "Lack of Objections" due to the lack of potential environmental impacts.

The Forest Service also received comment letters and emails on the *DEIS* supporting and questioning the necessity of the proposed project. Numerous comments stated that re-establishing and maintaining the fuelbreaks would lead to improved conditions for containing and controlling large wildfires that regularly threaten communities and natural resources in Big Sur. Other comments stated that fuelbreaks are ineffective in stopping large wildfires as fires will jump firelines, that wildfire control should focus on managing vegetation around structures, and that developed fuelbreaks should not occur in designated wilderness areas. The Forest Service is in the process of developing responses to the comments for inclusion in the *Final EIS* for the project.

The Forest Service concluded in its consistency determination that the Strategic Community Fuelbreak Improvement Project is designed and will be implemented to protect or minimize adverse impacts to natural resources of the coastal zone. The proposed re-establishment of historic fuelbreaks would occur on ridgelines which straddle the State coastal zone boundary and on National Forest lands excluded from the coastal zone.⁴ Therefore, the Commission has analyzed potential spillover impacts from vegetation clearing in the fuelbreaks on coastal resources outside the National Forest including water quality, soils, timberlands, riparian corridors, fisheries, terrestrial and avian species, and environmental sensitive habitats supporting those species. The Commission agrees with the Forest Service that the proposed re-establishment and maintenance of fuelbreaks on the Monterey Ranger District in the Big Sur region is unlikely to adversely affect the aforementioned coastal resources. Implementation and maintenance of the proposed project is expected to assist in containing the spread of large wildfires in the region and

⁴ The State coastal zone (and its inland boundary, which the fuelbreaks straddle) is different from the Federal coastal zone, which does not include any of these National Forest lands.

minimizing the damage to coastal resources that occurs during and subsequent to catastrophic wildfires. The project includes design and mitigation measures to protect coastal resources and will incorporate monitoring and adaptive management to ensure that future maintenance of the fuelbreaks will be modified if necessary to protect natural resources on the National Forest and in the coastal zone. Therefore, the Commission finds that the project is consistent with the water quality, environmentally sensitive habitat, soils and timberland, and fire hazard policies of the Coastal Act (Sections 30231, 30240, 30243, and 30253).

D. VISUAL RESOURCES AND PUBLIC RECREATION

Section 30251 of the Coastal Act states:

The scenic and visual qualities of coastal areas shall be considered and protected as a resource of public importance. Permitted development shall be sited and designed to protect views to and along the ocean and scenic coastal areas, to minimize the alteration of natural land forms, to be visually compatible with the character of surrounding areas, and, where feasible, to restore and enhance visual quality in visually degraded areas. New development in highly scenic areas such as those designated in the California Coastline Preservation and Recreation Plan prepared by the Department of Parks and Recreation and by local government shall be subordinate to the character of its setting.

Coastal Act Section 30210 states:

In carrying out the requirements of Section 4 of Article X of the California Constitution, maximum access, which shall be conspicuously posted, and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all the people consistent with public safety needs and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners, and natural resource areas from overuse.

Coastal Act Section 30213 states in part:

Lower cost visitor and recreational facilities shall be protected, encouraged, and, where feasible, provided. Developments providing public recreational opportunities are preferred

Coastal Act Section 30223 states:

Upland areas necessary to support coastal recreational uses shall be reserved for such uses, where feasible.

The consistency determination and the *DEIS* address potential impacts to public recreation and visual resources from re-establishment and maintenance of the historic fuelbreaks on ridgelines on the Monterey Ranger District. Regarding potential recreation impacts, the consistency determination states that:

Forest Developed Trails (FDT) are repeatedly damaged by bulldozers during emergency fire suppression operations. The following two FDTs traverse portions of the proposed fuelbreaks near the eastern perimeter of the Coastal Zone: Mount Manuel Trail and the intersection of the De Angulo Trail and North Coast Ridge Road.

Fuelbreak maintenance will reduce or eliminate the need for bulldozers to open these historic firebreaks during the next wildfire, thus protecting the scenic integrity and Forest Developed Trails. Embedded in the DEIS action alternatives are Project Design Standards (Appendix A) to minimize changes to the natural scenic character and improve or maintain the landscape's scenic integrity. For recreation, the DEIS concludes that there will be no change in recreational opportunities in the project area.

The consistency determination also notes that the proposed fuelbreaks are located on National Forest lands excluded from the coastal zone and that re-establishment and maintenance of the fuelbreaks would not directly or indirectly affect nearby public recreation facilities in the coastal zone.

The *DEIS* also examines potential recreation impacts:

Wildfires can have short and long-term impacts on recreation and the tourism industry. In the short-term, smoke, impaired viewsheds, and infrastructure damage from wildfire can reduce visitation for recreation. In the long-term, if structures within a community are damaged, it can take years to re-establish the services. In addition, damage to trails and viewsheds can affect the recreation quality for many years, depending on the intensity of the wildfire. In the long-term, in the event of a wildfire, trails will be closed during the fire and post-fire until the chance of flare-ups and the threat of landslides, mudslides, or flooding has passed.

The *DEIS* concludes that with a decreased risk of large-scale wildfire and the corresponding reduced risk to resource and infrastructure damage, including trails and developed recreation sites on the National Forest and in the adjacent coastal zone, there would be no adverse impacts to recreation in the Big Sur region with the re-establishment of the proposed fuelbreaks.

Regarding potential effects to visual resources from fuelbreak re-establishment, the consistency determination provides the following analysis:

The Strategic Community Fuelbreak Project will not be visible within the critical viewshed as defined in the Big Sur Coast Land Use Plan (3.2.2). Utilizing GIS data and aerial photography interpretation, the DEIS Landscape Architect identified the Coast Ridge Vicinity as potentially within the viewshed from Highway 1 and major public viewing areas (DEIS Figure 9). Distance from Highway 1 is up to 4 miles away and the viewshed is partially screened (DEIS Table 62).

Key viewpoints were selected as representative views from identified travelways to determine the potential for change to the view of the landscape (DEIS Figure 9). Because the view from Highway 1 is a Concern Level 1 (the most important)(DEIS Page 78), the interdisciplinary team (IDT) tried to locate a Key Viewpoint along this major highway. Due to steepness in topography (blocking view of ridgetops), distance, if a viewer were to get a glimpse of the ridge, the inability of the viewer to see the top of the ridge (where fuelbreak will be located), and the design criteria, the IDT could not locate a Key Viewpoint along Highway 1 or major public viewing area.

To comply with the Los Padres National Forest LMP (see LMP Implementation Standards above), the Project incorporated Project Design Standards that will visually integrate and blend the fuelbreaks into the larger landscape and thereby preserving or improving the scenic integrity of the area. In support of the DEIS, a Scenery Report (Bueno 2015) was prepared to examine the manner in which the project complies with LMP Scenic Integrity Objectives. The objective is to maintain the landscape free from visible deviations that detract from the valued scenic character and the extent to which the valued scenic character is maintained over time as viewed from Key Viewpoints (DEIS Table 62).

The Report determined that implementation of the project, with careful adherence to the scenery design standards, would either maintain or improve scenic integrity objectives.

The consistency determination also included this critical note regarding visual resources and the impacts from previously constructed firebreaks:

During recent past wildfires, e.g. the 2016 Soberanes, 2008 Basin Complex, and the 1999 Kirk Complex, many firebreaks were built within the critical viewshed and [are] clearly visible. Those viewable firebreaks are not proposed for maintenance under the Strategic Community Fuelbreak Improvement Project.

The Commission has analyzed the potential spillover impacts to public recreation in the coastal zone, that is, in areas located off of National Forest lands. The fuelbreaks that would be re-established and maintained are located on inland ridgelines that straddle the coastal zone boundary and are distant from public recreation areas located off the National Forest and along the Highway 1 corridor. The proposed project would therefore not adversely affect public recreation areas or activities located within the coastal zone. The Commission has also examined whether the fuelbreaks would create adverse impacts to scenic public views in and/or from the coastal zone. As noted in the consistency determination and the *DEIS*, the location of the fuelbreaks are such that they are not visible from Highway 1 or from other public viewing areas off of National Forest lands. Notwithstanding that the fuelbreaks would not be visible from these public locations, the fuelbreaks are designed to comply with the Los Padres National Forest Land Management Plan Scenic Integrity Objectives and to visually integrate and blend into the surrounding landscape.

The Commission agrees with the Forest Service that the proposed re-establishment and maintenance of fuelbreaks on the Monterey Ranger District in the Big Sur region would not adversely affect public recreation or visual resources in the coastal zone. The project is expected to assist in containing the spread of large wildfires in the region and minimizing the damage to coastal resources that occurs during and subsequent to catastrophic wildfires. The project includes design and mitigation measures to protect recreation and visual resources and includes monitoring and adaptive management to ensure that future maintenance of the fuelbreaks will be modified, if necessary, to protect public recreation and visual resources on the National Forest and in the coastal zone. Therefore, the Commission finds that the project is consistent with the public recreation and visual resource policies of the Coastal Act (Sections 30251, 30210, 30213, and 30223).

E. CULTURAL RESOURCES

Coastal Act Section 30244 states:

Where development would adversely impact archaeological or paleontological resources as identified by the State Historic Preservation Officer, reasonable mitigation measures shall be required.

Cultural resources are places or objects that possess cultural, archaeological, or paleontological significance and include sites, structures, or objects significantly associated with, or representative of, earlier people, cultures, and human activities. The consistency determination, the January 2017 *DEIS*, and the July 2015 *Heritage Report for the Strategic Community Fuelbreak Improvement Project* address cultural resources in the project area, potential impacts to those resources, and required protective measures. The *Report* states that previous and post-fire cultural resource surveys covered a large percentage of the currently proposed fuelbreak corridors, and documented a limited number of archaeological sites in the area of potential effect (APE). Most of these sites are prehistoric milling stations consisting of bedrock mortars. In addition, ridgetops (where the fuelbreaks are located) were most likely used as travel routes and temporary camps by Native Americans, especially in ridgeline saddles. However, most of the ridgetops included in the current project have been subjected to repeated bulldozer activities over the last half-century, resulting in churned soils and disturbance to cultural resources. To protect any remaining cultural resources in the project area, the *Report* states that:

If cultural resources are present, procedures must be in place to prevent adverse effects to the resources. In addition, there is the stipulation that if cultural resources are discovered during implementation, then the activities in the immediate area must cease until the appropriate Forest archaeologist is notified and has addressed the situation.

The *DEIS* states that:

The most likely prehistoric cultural resources within the fuelbreak APE [area of potential effect] are milling stations with bedrock mortars and sparse lithic

scatters, along with isolated finished stone tools such as projectile points, pestles, and hammer-stones . . .

Substantial ground disturbance exists throughout the APE as a result of previous fire suppression activities, including bulldozer line and road construction. Expected prehistoric cultural resource sites in the fuelbreak APE would be small and fragile and few in number. There is no way of knowing whether such sites have already been destroyed by fires of fire suppression.

The *DEIS* notes that implementation of the proposed project includes “flag and avoid” measures from the *Regional Programmatic Agreement* with the State Historic Preservation Office, and as a result, the re-establishment and maintenance of the fuelbreaks would not create direct impacts to known cultural resources. If unknown cultural resources are discovered during project implementation, these would be verified, recorded, and protected. In addition, after re-establishment of the fuelbreaks the expected reduction of heavy equipment and scraping down to mineral soil during emergency fire suppression activities in the fuelbreak corridors would reduce potential impacts to cultural resources in those areas. The *DEIS* concludes that:

Improving the fuelbreaks would reduce the current heavy fuel loads and decrease the risk of high intensity and more widespread wildfires. Maintaining the proposed fuelbreaks in a non-emergency environment would help protect both known and unknown sites.

However, the *Heritage Report* states that there is the potential for indirect effects on cultural resources after re-establishment of the fuelbreaks:

The strategic fuelbreaks are intended to curtail the spread of wildfires, potentially affecting currently unknown cultural resources and exposing them to the risks of looting and vandalism. Dispersed camping by hikers already occurs on the fuelbreak ridgetops, and even more hiking and camping can be expected when the fuelbreaks are more open to pedestrian travel, which could lead to an increase in casual artifact collection by the public.

The *Heritage Report* concludes that while improving the fuelbreaks could result in a slightly increased risk of cultural resource loss to looters, the re-establishment and maintenance of fuelbreaks would decrease the possibility of damage to those resources from wildfire and existing suppression activities involving bulldozers and soil disturbance. In addition, cultural resources monitoring will occur before and after project implementation, and the National Forest Land Management plan includes provisions for the ongoing identification, evaluation, and protection of cultural resources and addressing tribal concerns. The Forest Service also stated in its September 2015 *Documentation of Tribal Government Consultation & Coordination* report that consultation letters were sent to representatives of the Salinan and Esselen tribal groups and that no concerns or telephone calls were received from regarding the proposed fuelbreaks project.

In conclusion, the Commission agrees with the Forest Service that the proposed re-establishment and maintenance of fuelbreaks on the Monterey Ranger District in the Big Sur region is unlikely to adversely affect cultural resources in the project area or in the adjacent coastal zone outside of the National Forest. The fuelbreak corridors have been repeatedly disturbed by past wildfire suppression activities and the potential for adverse effects on cultural resources is low. Should previously unknown cultural resources be discovered during implementation of the project, activities in the immediate area will be suspended until the appropriate Forest Service archaeologist is notified and has implemented protective measures. Therefore, the Commission finds that the project is consistent with the cultural resource policy of the Coastal Act (Section 30244).

Substantive File Documents

1. CD-0008-17 (Los Padres National Forest, Strategic Community Fuelbreak Improvement Project, Monterey County).
2. Draft Environmental Impact Statement, Strategic Community Fuelbreak Improvement Project, Los Padres National Forest, January 2017.
3. ND-081-05 (Los Padres National Forest, Updated Land and Resource Management Plan, Monterey County).
4. CD-018-88 (Los Padres National Forest, Land and Resource Management Plan, Monterey County).
5. CD-006-84 (Los Padres National Forest, Coast Ridge Firebreak, Monterey County)