



United States Department of Agriculture

Research, Education, and Economics
Agricultural Research Service

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Proposed Canopy Trail at the U.S. National Arboretum

August 2, 2024

On behalf of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Agricultural Research Service and the U.S. National Arboretum (USNA), and in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), an Environmental Assessment (EA) was prepared to evaluate potential environmental effects from construction and operation of a proposed canopy trail attraction at the USNA in Washington, DC. The purpose of the proposed action is to expand educational and visitor opportunities, as well as generate revenue for the USNA.

The USDA - USNA is the lead Federal agency for the preparation and coordination of the EA and the National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) is participating as a cooperating agency (40 CFR § 1501.8) during the EA process to satisfy the NCPC Commission's NEPA obligation for the project. NCPC is also a Consulting Party for the project's concurrent process under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

The USNA, located in northeast Washington, D.C., was established in 1927 by an Act of Congress. It is operated by the USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and serves as a research and education facility, museum, and park. The USNA spans 451 acres and includes 9.5 miles of winding roadways connecting the campus's gardens and collections. The Arboretum welcomed more than 660,000 visitors in 2022. In addition to its federal budget, the USNA receives volunteer and financial support from nine non-profit organizations, one of which is the Friends of the National Arboretum (FONA).

The FONA proposed construction of a Canopy Trail attraction at the USNA to expand educational and visitor opportunities at the Arboretum. Canopy trails—also called canopy walks, treetop walks, or treetop walkways—provide pedestrian access to a forest canopy. These types of attractions typically consist of a series of bridges between trees in the canopy of a forest that link to platforms around the trees. The Canopy Trail would be a paid attraction focusing on the benefits of trees, would complement existing USNA's programming, and would support the USNA's Strategic Plan to expand visitor services and programs.

Proposed Action

The Proposed Action is the Build Alternative (i.e., proposed Canopy Trail attraction) and includes the construction of three self-guided, aboveground Canopy Trail segments weaving through the existing forested USNA project study area for a combined trail length of 1,294 feet. The three trail

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segments would lead visitors up to 20 to 30 feet above ground over a ravine toward an unnamed tributary of the Anacostia River, offering an aerial perspective for visitors of all ages and abilities. Visitors would move freely throughout the trail system, observing, admiring, and learning about the forest in the Arboretum. The three Canopy Trail segments (Phase 1, Phase 2, and Phase 3) would consist of a series of bridges and platforms attached to existing trees. Proprietary hardware would be used to mount the decks to the trees. This hardware is specially designed to attach to and grow with the trees without impacting their health.

The Build Alternative would be designed and built to look as though it grew from the forest, using natural-colored materials and curved black locust logs. Materials used would be a combination of galvanized aircraft cable; 12mm zip line swaged cable; black locust and eastern white cedar; highly rated, long-lasting netting and lashing cord; high-tech rope; and custom, galvanized hardware. Equipment, material, and building standards would adhere to the quality standards approved by American National Standards Institute (ANSI), Association for Challenge Course Technology (ACCT), and/or ASTM International (formerly the American Society for Testing and Materials).

Project design and construction of the Build Alternative would be phased, as funds become available, with the first trail constructed in Phase 1, the second trail in Phase 2, and the third trail in Phase 3.

The Build Alternative would be implemented through a public-private partnership between the USNA and FONA. FONA would raise the funds to pay for the construction of the proposed Canopy Trail Project and would assume full responsibility for the operations and maintenance of the attraction. Prior to construction, FONA would enter into a revenue share agreement with the USDA/USNA solidifying roles and responsibilities between FONA and the USNA.

Reasons for Finding of No Significant Impact

The analysis documented in the EA demonstrates the Build Alternative would not significantly affect the human environment; therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) will not be prepared. The determination of a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) is based on the following:

The Build Alternative would contribute to the expansion of recreational and educational opportunities within the Arboretum and the surrounding area. Revenue generated by the proposed Canopy Trail Project would be distributed to the Arboretum to help support its missions and goals.

The overall adverse impact of the Build Alternative would be minimal, given the nature of the proposed action and the findings of the analyses conducted for the EA. Under the Build Alternative:

- There would be minimal creation of impervious surfaces.
- There would be minimal ground-disturbing activities during construction and none post-construction.
- Impacts to air quality and noise would be minimal during construction and absent post-construction.

- The canopy trails would avoid physical disturbance of wetlands and WOUS by bridging over these resources.
- Limited ground-disturbing activities would minimize the potential for erosion and sedimentation during and post-construction.
- The DC HPO concurred with the USDA's determination of no adverse effect on above-ground historic properties, that no archaeological resources were identified, and that no additional archaeological investigations are necessary at this time (July 29, 2024) (see Appendix E: Section 106 Coordination Errata in Attachment C). The DC HPO's concurrence is contingent upon the USNA's fulfillment of the conditions below:
 - (1) The USNA submits to DC HPO a final, full technical Cultural Resources report, revised per DC HPO comments and per DC Archaeology Guidelines.
 - (2) The USNA submits to the DC HPO copies of all data generated (digital and paper) of all field notes, associated records, and GIS data for curation, all prepared following DC Archaeology Guidelines and the existing Collections Agreement for this project.
 - (3) The USNA will conduct additional consultation with the DC HPO, should project plans change.
 - (4) If any type of post-review / unanticipated archaeological discovery is made during construction, the USNA will immediately contact DC HPO.

Following USNA's receipt of the DC HPO's determination of no adverse effect, the requested materials will be submitted to the DC HPO, in the appropriate format, in August 2024. In addition, the USNA commits to additional consultation with DC HPO should the Build Alternative plans change and/or should an unanticipated archaeological discovery be made during construction.

- The USNA will adhere to time-of-year restrictions for construction activities, prohibiting large, motorized construction and landscaping within the 660-foot buffer area around the nesting pair of bald eagles during their breeding and fledging season (December 15 to July 1).
- Minimal alteration of existing vegetation will minimize potential impacts to the nesting pair of bald eagles and migratory bird species.
- The USFWS determined the Build Alternative is not likely to adversely affect (NLAA) the Northern Long-eared bat (NLEB).
- The potential beneficial and adverse impacts of implementing the Build Alternative have been fully considered within the EA; no significant adverse direct, indirect, or cumulative effects were identified based on this analysis.

- As detailed in the analysis presented in the EA, the Build Alternative would not significantly affect water quality, soils, wetlands, vegetation or wildlife, air quality, climate change, socioeconomics, and environmental justice, or other important resources.
- The Build Alternative would not involve effects to the quality of the human environment that are likely to be highly controversial.
- The Build Alternative would not threaten a violation of Federal, state, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.
- No comments were received on the Draft EA and no controversies were identified.

Determination

In accordance with NEPA, which implements the regulations of the Council on Environmental Quality found at 40 CFR parts 1500-1508, I find the Build Alternative would not significantly affect the quality of the human environment; therefore, no Environmental Impact Statement will be prepared.



Signature of the responsible official

Dr. Richard T. Olsen, Director
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07/31/2024

Date

Attachments

- FONSI Attachment A – Final EA Errata
- FONSI Attachment B – Final EA Appendix A: USNA Canopy Trail Draft Plans Errata
- FONSI Attachment C – Final EA Appendix E: Section 106 Coordination Errata
- FONSI Attachment D – Final EA Appendix F: Final Cultural Resources Survey Report
- FONSI Attachment E – Final EA Appendix G: Additional Coordination