

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Pilot release of ‘Alalā, or Hawaiian crow (*Corvus hawaiiensis*) on East Maui Environmental Assessment

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the State of Hawai‘i Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR), as a joint lead agencies, prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) to examine alternative actions and potential impacts to the human environment associated with a pilot release of ‘alalā on east Maui, Hawai‘i (HDLNR/USFWS 2023). The EA was completed in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended (NEPA), and its implementing regulations (40 CFR 1500-1508) as revised by the Council on Environmental Quality in 2022, as well as Department of the Interior NEPA Regulations (43 CFR 46). The purpose of this project is to evaluate whether ‘alalā will breed in wet forest on east Maui, in absence of their natural predator, ‘io or Hawaiian hawk (*Buteo solitarius*), thereby reducing extinction risk and contributing to the recovery of this species. The statements and conclusions reached in this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) are based on documentation and analysis provided in the EA. Relevant sections of the EA are summarized and incorporated by reference below. Although the EA was a cooperative Federal and state compliance document satisfying both NEPA and the Hawai‘i Environmental Policy Act (HEPA) regulations, this FONSI analyzes only the impacts under the current NEPA requirements.

Preferred Alternative

Four alternatives were thoroughly analyzed in the EA, and Alternative 3: Release of ‘alalā to only Kīpahulu Forest Reserve (Kīpahulu FR) on Maui was selected because it best meets the purpose of, and need for, the goals and objectives of the project, without causing significant impacts on the human environment (the preferred alternative is described in detail in Chapter 5 of the EA). This finding is based on consideration of CEQ NEPA regulation criteria for significance (40 CFR 1501.3 (b)), and the USFWS Policy on Significance Criteria (550 FW 3(B)(2)), regarding the potentially affected environment and the associated impacts as described in the EA. Additionally, a reasonable range of alternatives were considered but dismissed from detailed analysis because they did not meet the purpose and need of the Proposed Action (see Section 1.2 of the EA).

Under the preferred alternative, the USFWS and DLNR along with other non-governmental partner organizations will release up to 7 ‘alalā on east Maui in the Healani Section of the State of Hawai‘i’s Kīpahulu Forest Reserve, and supplemental releases may occur to compensate mortality during years 2 and 3 (no more than a total of 10 to 15 birds released over the life of this project): 5-year project, beginning spring/summer 2024. Birds will be provided supplemental foods to ease their transition to the wild and monitored. The project will be assessed year 3 of the releases to determine if results suggest the project should continue to year 5, and the agencies will undergo an additional NEPA compliance evaluation at that time should it be deemed that keeping the birds on the landscape or adding to the population is beneficial to the species.

Avoidance and Minimization Measures

The EA incorporates avoidance and minimization measures to avoid significant adverse impacts to other species, habitat, and the environment. These avoidance and minimization measures will

be implemented to protect Federal and state listed plants and animals, non-listed flora and fauna, cultural/historic/ethnographic resources, public health and safety, and recreation (see Chapter 3 and Appendices H through K of the EA, incorporated by reference in this FONSI).

Significance Criteria Review

Potentially Affected Environment

The project area is comprised of 8,367 acres (3,386 hectares) on the southwest slope of Haleakalā Volcano on east Maui, encompassing the Healani and ‘Ahulili sections of Kīpahulu FR, Haleakalā National Park’s Kīpahulu Valley Biological Reserve, and private lands to the west of Kīpahulu FR (see Figure 2 in the EA). The Kīpahulu FR and Haleakalā National Park overlap with extant native forest bird habitat. Designating the project area was developed collaboratively between USFWS, DLNR and Haleakalā National Park.

Degree of Effects of the Action

The EA analyzed the following actual or potential project effects in evaluating the degree of effects (40 CFR 1501.3(b)) for the preferred alternative. No significant impacts to resources were identified that would require further analysis in an Environmental Impact Statement. Taken individually, or as a whole, the impacts of the preferred alternative, including direct, indirect and cumulative effects, do not reach the level of significant impacts because the anticipated impacts would be minimal or temporary. The preferred alternative would be expected to result in substantial long-term beneficial impacts to ‘ālalā and the native ecosystem.

Threatened and Endangered Species

The impacts from the preferred alternative and the foreseeable actions can be effectively reduced to negligible levels using the avoidance and minimization measures outlined in sections 3.1.3, 3.2.2.3, 3.2.3.3, and Appendices H through K of the EA. Although there would be temporary and localized impacts to wildlife and plants, the population and health of rare and listed species and their habitats would improve or remain stable. As previously described, the preferred alternative would improve understanding of release methods for ‘ālalā. The preferred alternative along with other planned foreseeable state and private management actions, including invasive plant control, feral ungulate control, and predator control would enhance survival of native forest bird species and plants by reducing stressors, and through the native plant seed dispersal ecosystem services provided by ‘ālalā.

Wildlife and Vegetation Resources

The preferred alternative would not result in significant impacts to wildlife and vegetation resources beyond that of the ongoing and future known activities (EA Section 3.2 [wildlife], Section 3.1 [plants]). Trends and impacts from planned foreseeable actions would be expected to remain the same, or similar to, what is currently occurring. The DLNR, USFWS, and all partners implementing this project will comply with State and Federal invasive species biosecurity protocols to prevent the spread and introduction of invasive species (EA Appendices H and I). Other management actions that are ongoing or that may occur in the project area are identified in the Cumulative Effects (EA Section 3.10).

Cultural Resources

A primary impact of the proposed action on cultural resources would be the anticipated positive outcome from ‘alalā presence in the forest environment. ‘Alalā is an important ecological and cultural resource by the Native Hawaiian community and preserving the ‘alalā is a priority by Native Hawaiian community leaders (CIA, EA Appendix M). The findings of the USFWS Section 106 consultation under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470(f)) and DLNR cultural impact analysis (Brand and Lopes 2003) (EA Appendix M) indicate the project would not adversely impact cultural and historic sites, cultural resources, practices, or beliefs. While cultural practitioners may use roads or trails in project area to gather forest plants, hunt, or for other cultural practices, ‘alalā releases and monitoring would not interfere with access or activities. The physical impacts would be minimal and no greater than the current ongoing activities occurring by the public, cultural practitioners, DLNR, Haleakalā National Park, and other management partners using or maintaining Kīpahulu FR and Haleakalā National Park. Avoidance and minimization measures would ensure project personnel stay on designated roads and trails and any trail creations would have minimal impacts (EA Section 3.1.3), project-related activities remain limited to existing routes of travel (i.e., fence line corridors, trails, and roads), and established helicopter landing zones would be used.

Public Health and Safety

The preferred alternative considers public health and safety during project implementation; there is no evidence that releasing ‘alalā on east Maui would have human health impacts. Despite its rapid spread across the continental US in the early 2000s, West Nile virus (WNV), as of 2023, has not arrived in Hawai‘i (https://health.hawaii.gov/docd/disease_listing/west-nile-virus). However, ‘alalā released for this project will be vaccinated for WNV. Avian diseases that ‘alalā are known to contract, such as avian malaria (*Plasmodium relictum*) and avian pox (*Avipoxvirus*), are not known to be transferrable to humans. ‘Alalā will be screened for avian diseases before release and ‘alalā found to be infected with WNV, avian malaria, or avian pox will not be released. Additionally, avian diseases that ‘alalā may contract upon release into the wild are not known to be transferable to humans.

Recreation and Wilderness

The preferred alternative may cause intermittent, temporary increases in human activity and presence, and overall number of aircraft operations in the area. This may result in impacts to visitor experiences of land-based recreation; however, because of the low use of the remote area, the impacts to the public are expected to be minor. There will be no change to public use or access to state-managed recreation areas and there are no foreseeable changes to the types of use or levels of use that are allowed to occur within the project area (EA Section 3.8).

Air Quality, Greenhouse Gas Emissions, and Climate Change

‘Alalā releases would use existing commercial air transport services (EA Section 3.5 and 3.9). The project would not contribute to air quality, greenhouse gas emissions, or climate change effects beyond the current background levels. Though climate change effects are expected to continue affecting Maui and the project area, greenhouse gases from helicopter and motor vehicle emissions associated with the proposed action are not expected to exacerbate the effects of global climate change or cause further declines in local climatic conditions.

Public Involvement

Community meetings were held in Hāna, Ke‘anae, Kaupō, and Makawao, Maui, (July to November 2022). Throughout 2022, presentations and feedback solicitations occurred for the following groups: Hawai‘i Cattleman’s Association, Maui County Farm Bureau, East Maui Watershed Partnership, Mauna Kahālāwai Watershed Partnership, The Nature Conservancy, and Haleakalā National Park. Early in project development, leaders of the respective ahupua‘a (traditional Hawaiian land subdivisions) were asked to help identify issues and concerns, and a cultural advisory committee was created. February 2023, an early consultation letter was distributed to a large group of stakeholders, private landowners, special interest groups, and conservation groups, and comments were received (EA Appendices C and D). An in-person public informational meeting was held on November 8, 2023, at Kula Elementary School, East Maui. Comments from posting the draft EA for public comment and these public engagement opportunities were considered and incorporated into the EA (EA Appendix C).

Conclusions

Based on review and evaluation of the EA, the USFWS has determined that the Proposed Action alternative is not a major Federal action that would significantly adversely affect the quality of the human environment, within the meaning of section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, as amended. Accordingly, the Service is not required to prepare an EIS for this proposed action.

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Date

References Cited

Brand, L., and S. K. Lopes. 2023. Cultural Impact Assessment for the Release of Endangered Captive-bred 'Alalā in the Ko'olau and Kipahulu Forest Reserves, (2)-1-002:002 por. And (2)1-7-004:006 por., Ke'anae and Nāholokū Ahupua'a, Ko'olau and Kaupō Districts Island of Maui. 111 pp.

[HDLNR] Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources Division. January 19, 2024. State Historic Preservation Review Project Name: Pilot Release of 'Alalā (*Corvus hawaiiensis*) on East Maui. 9 pp. + Appendices.

[HDLNR/USFWS] Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources Division of Forestry and Wildlife/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2023. Environmental Assessment for Pilot Release of 'Alalā (*Corvus hawaiiensis*) on East Maui, Hawai'i. 74 pp. + Appendices.

[USFWS] U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. October 16, 2023. Authorization of Hawai'i Division of Forestry and Wildlife to Initiate and Conduct National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 Consultation in Conjunction with State of Hawai'i, State Historic Preservation 6E Review for the Release of 'Alalā on East Maui Project. 2 pp.