

Cancellation of 2011 Fort Ord Prescribed Burns

Frequently Asked Questions

What types of items were found on units 11 and 12 to cause the cancellation of the 2011 Fort Ord prescribed burns? Two types of large artillery projectiles were found on the ground surface during preparation activities for the 2011 prescribed burns. An 8-inch projectile (see photo at upper right) and two 155 millimeter (mm) projectiles (see photo at lower right) were found in Units 11 and 12. The type of ordnance found in the unit determines safety setback distances for MEC workers. Those distances are then used to establish the width of the prescribed burn containment lines, as well as the altitude that helicopters igniting the prescribed burn must fly.



What happened to these items? These items were detonated on June 1, 2011. This procedure safely removed the explosive hazard.

I thought the Army used prescribed burns because burns were safer than mechanical cutting to remove the vegetation. In Impact Area prescribed burning remains the safest method for vegetation removal except in units where large artillery munitions are discovered on the surface or where wildfire risks are not manageable. This is because the total risk exposure for munitions and explosives of concern (MEC) workers is less when prescribed burning is used for vegetation removal as compared to mechanical cutting. This year, however, large artillery projectiles were encountered on the surface of Units 11 and 12. Safety standards require that items like these be considered capable of detonating during a prescribed burn. Safety considerations for these types of items require a much greater safety standoff distance for firefighters and MEC workers during a prescribed burn than had been anticipated. These safety standoff distances exceed the Army's capabilities to conduct a safe prescribed burn. Because of these specific circumstances, the vegetation in Units 11 and 12 must be cut to allow the safe remediation of MEC.

What is the process to safely cut the vegetation in units 11 and 12? The vegetation will be cut in two phases. Initially, it is cut to about 18 inches high, allowing a munitions and explosives of concern technician to inspect the ground surface for significant threats to the workers operating the mowers including the munitions and explosives of concern. If no munitions are found, the vegetation cutting can resume for the remaining vegetation to within about 6 inches of the ground surface. However, if munitions and explosives of concern are found, the technician will either move the item (if this can be done safely) or detonate it in place (to remove the explosive hazard). Vegetation cutting can resume after the item is either moved or detonated. This two phased cutting operation with technical oversight is necessary to ensure a safe vegetation removal process.

Was the 8-inch projectile from a Navy ship in Monterey Bay firing into the Fort Ord Impact Area? The 8-inch artillery projectile was the type that was fired by Army artillery. While there is some belief that large naval rounds were shot from Monterey Bay into the Impact Area, evidence of naval munitions has not been found during cleanup operations. All the large artillery items found in units 11 and 12 have been identified as Army munitions.

Why can't the Army just cut all the remaining vegetation throughout the Impact Area rather than burning it? Prescribed burning is necessary for two reasons. First, the munitions of concern within the Impact Area include small unexploded munitions, some with fuzes that can be hazardous to munitions workers when they are working in areas covered by thick vegetation or when working in the residue from vegetation cutting. Second, prescribed burns best support the recovery of the rare Central Maritime Chaparral habitat and are required by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under the Federal Endangered Species Act. The risks associated with cutting or burning must be balanced to best protect cleanup and habitat workers and nearby residents while also conserving a rare habitat. All these risks and considerations are carefully evaluated for each site before the Army selects a method for vegetation removal.

Will there be burns in the future? Yes, the Fort Ord prescribed burn program will resume in 2012. Over 4,000 acres inside the Fort Ord Impact Area remain to be cleaned up. In addition, the vegetation (primarily Central Maritime Chaparral) must be burned to ensure habitat recovery as required by the Endangered Species Act and the Record of Decision for the Impact Area.

Currently, the Army projects that the munitions cleanup in the Impact Area will be completed in 2020. Is this schedule still correct with the cancellation of the 2011 prescribed burns? At this time, the Army does not anticipate any change to this schedule. Units 11 and 12 will be cut and munitions and explosives of concern will be removed from the surface this year. Once the vegetation has grown back enough to carry a fire, the units will be burned. These actions can be accommodated within the current work schedule.

Will the discovery of these munitions items change the configuration of the units? Over the next year, the units inside the Impact Area which must still be cleaned up will be evaluated. Since the Impact Area is such a large area, it is divided into units. The unit size and shape is contingent on existing fuel break roads, topography, fuel loading and, most importantly, on the fire department's ability to manage the fire safely. Specific burn units are prioritized for prescribed burning to create a safety buffer for fire fighter safety. Future burn plans will show the configuration and sizes of the units that are scheduled for burning.