U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
CONSTRUCTION OF THE SAVANNAH RIVER ECOLOGY LABORATORY CONFERENCE CENTER
SAVANNAH RIVER SITE, AIKEN, SC

AGENCY: U.S. Department of Energy

ACTION: Finding of No Significant Impact

SUMMARY: The Department of Energy (DOE) has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA), DOE/EA-0835, to authorize the use of Federal land by the University of Georgia Research Foundation, Inc., to construct and operate a conference center for the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory (SREL) on an approximate 70 acre tract of land at the Savannah River Site (SRS), near Aiken, South Carolina. Based on the information and analyses in the EA, DOE has determined that the proposed action is not a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment, within the meaning of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969. Therefore, the preparation of an environmental impact statement is not required and DOE is issuing a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI).

PUBLIC AVAILABILITY:

Copies of this EA and FONSI are available from:

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BACKGROUND: The University of Georgia Research Foundation, Inc., operates SREL under contract to DOE. The SREL mission is to conduct basic and applied research on SRS to develop an understanding of the impacts of various energy technologies and natural resource management practices on the ecosystems of the southeastern United States. In addition, SREL communicates this knowledge to the public and the scientific community.

PROPOSED ACTION: The proposed action is for DOE to grant a site use permit to the University of Georgia Research Foundation, Inc., to construct and operate a 4,000 square foot single-story SREL conference center on a 70-acre site north of U.S. Highway 278 near Upper Three Runs Creek on the Savannah River Site. The construction of the proposed conference center would further the SREL mission by enhancing educational outreach programs and by providing a facility in which small groups of scientists could hold workshops in areas related to DOE programs. In addition, the facility could host foreign visitors who otherwise could experience difficulty in obtaining access to secure areas. Finally, SREL could make the facility available for use by other SRS groups and the public. The existing SREL facility on the SRS (Building 737-A) does not lend itself to these goals because it does not have sufficient space for such activities.

The University of Georgia Research Foundation, Inc., would provide the funding for the construction of the facility. SREL would operate, manage, and maintain the center as part of its applied research mission at SRS. The Research Foundation would own the facility. If the Research Foundation's contract were to expire, the title to the conference center would pass to DOE.

ALTERNATIVES: DOE considered the following alternatives to the proposed action of authorizing the use of SRS land for an SREL conference center: (1) the no-action alternative, and (2) preserve the proposed site in a natural state with minimal activities.

Under the no-action alternative, the University of Georgia Research Foundation, Inc., would not be granted permission to construct and operate a new conference center on the proposed site and the existing SREL facility would continue to be used. Instead, ongoing actions (timber management) as described in the SRS Natural Resources Management Plan and Savannah River Forest Station operational management plans would continue.

Under the site preservation alternative, the proposed site would be preserved in a natural state with a minimal number of activities occurring. Access would be limited to activities necessary to support the SRS mission indirectly, such as fire suppression, red-cockaded woodpecker management, and appropriate security actions.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS: The potential consequences of the construction and operation of the proposed facility were analyzed to determine if there were any significant environmental impacts.

The environmental consequences were found to be negligible or minor. The proposed conference center site is in Archaeological Sensitivity Zone I, which has the highest probability of containing significant archeological sites. However, based on the results of a cultural resource survey in the site area and consultation with the South Carolina Historic Preservation Officer, the proposed conference center has been sited to avoid potential impacts to archaeological resources. Additionally, results of a biological assessment performed in consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have indicated that the proposed construction will not adversely affect a threatened, endangered, or sensitive species. The primary impact of the proposed project would be loss of approximately 5-10 acres of planted pine habitat. No wetlands or floodplains would be affected and no cumulative impacts are expected from the proposed facility.

DETERMINATION: Based on the information and analyses in the EA, DOE has determined that the proposed action to grant permission to the University of Georgia Research Foundation, Inc. to construct and operate the SREL Conference Center does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment within the meaning of NEPA. Therefore, an environmental impact statement is not required.

Issued at Washington, D.C., this 19th day of July 1993.

Peter N. Brush
Acting Assistant Secretary
Environment, Safety and Health