

Executive Summary

Introduction

The National Park Service (NPS) has prepared an environmental assessment identifying and evaluating four alternatives for the comprehensive rehabilitation of The Ahwahnee hotel and its associated structures. This document is intended to meet the requirements of section 102(2) (C) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA).

The Ahwahnee hotel is situated at the eastern end of Yosemite Valley, north of the Merced River and at the foot of the Royal Arches rock formation. Completed in 1927, the hotel was designed by architect Gilbert Stanley Underwood for the Yosemite Park and Curry Company. In 1928, a series of eight cottages designed by architect Eldridge (Ted) Spencer were built within an adjacent grove of pines to the east of the main building. Other features within The Ahwahnee developed area include a parking area and a reflecting pond to the north, an employee dormitory to the west, and landscaping designed by Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr.

The Ahwahnee was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977 and was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1987 for its architectural significance and relationship to prominent historical figures. It is considered one of the greatest national park lodges, and it was the last of the lodges to be built to such high levels of artistic significance and achievement.

The Ahwahnee has operated as a luxury hotel almost continuously since it opened in 1927. Although The Ahwahnee generally complied with building standards in effect at the time of construction, after more than 80 years in service, facilities at The Ahwahnee are not fully compliant with current fire protection and building codes, recommended seismic safety practices, and accessibility codes and guidelines. Many of the electrical, plumbing, and mechanical systems are aging and need to be replaced or updated. In addition, some historic hotel finishes and landscape components have deteriorated or have been altered over the years, and are in need of rehabilitation to protect and preserve the historic integrity of this National Historic Landmark.

Purpose and Need

In order to achieve goals and directives set forth in federal law, policy, and guidelines, as well as the 1980 Yosemite National Park *General Management Plan*, the purpose of this project is to develop a comprehensive plan for phased, long-term rehabilitation of The Ahwahnee hotel and its associated structures. Specifically, this comprehensive rehabilitation plan will identify actions to:

- Improve visitor and employee safety by bringing The Ahwahnee into compliance with current building, fire protection, and seismic safety standards;
- Preserve and protect the historic integrity and character-defining features of The Ahwahnee by rehabilitating aged or altered historic finishes;
- Improve hotel energy and water-use efficiency and operations by repairing or replacing outdated or inefficient building systems and components;
- Maintain the traditional level of visitor service and the visitor experience at The Ahwahnee through improved operational efficiency, increased accessibility, and rehabilitation of historic resources.

Several recent studies of facilities at The Ahwahnee have evaluated life-safety and seismic stability compliance and the conditions of structures and grounds. These condition assessments have identified the need for rehabilitation, repair, replacement, and/or improvement of multiple structural, mechanical, electrical, plumbing, circulation, and landscape components, as well as rehabilitation of deteriorated or incompatibly altered historic features and finishes. In addition, opportunities to improve accessibility and operational and energy efficiencies have been identified. A comprehensive rehabilitation program to address the identified code deficiencies, outdated equipment, and threats to historic integrity is needed.

Relationship to Other Plans

The Ahwahnee Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan Environmental Assessment is informed by the 1980 *General Management Plan*. The goals for The Ahwahnee described in the *General Management Plan*, as amended by the 1992 *Concession Services Plan*, relate primarily to visitor use: retaining the traditional Ahwahnee character and level of service, but removing amenities for outdoor activities that are not directly related to enjoyment of the natural resources.

Overview of the Alternatives

The Ahwahnee Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan Environmental Assessment describes and analyzes four alternatives.

No Action Alternative

The No Action Alternative is required by the National Environmental Policy Act and NPS Director's Order 12: Conservation Planning, Environmental Impact Analysis and Decision-making, to provide the baseline against which to compare the other alternatives. This alternative assumes that existing conditions at The Ahwahnee would continue. Actions to address code compliance, protect resources, or enhance operations and visitor experience are included in the action alternatives, but are not considered part of the No Action Alternative for the purposes of this assessment.

Alternative 1

Alternative 1 would meet the fundamental objectives of the comprehensive rehabilitation program with minimally invasive measures. This alternative would rely on code waivers and operational management wherever possible to meet project goals. Alternative 1 would maintain current program spaces to the extent practicable, for both operational efficiency and to improve visitor experience, while meeting minimum safety code requirements.

Alternative 1 also proposes historic rehabilitation of historic fabric and features throughout the hotel and cottages that are rated in *The Ahwahnee Historic Structures Report* (ARG 2011) as being in "poor" condition, and historic fabric and features rated as being in "fair" condition in the "significant" and "very significant" spaces. The energy efficiency elements of this alternative would implement measures that affect the building and historic fabric only where other work is occurring or where there otherwise would be no impact on the historic resource.

Alternative 2

Alternative 2 would address fire and life-safety, seismic, structural, and accessibility code and standard deficiencies using more substantive code compliance, and would exceed the basic seismic safety requirements for federal buildings while providing a higher degree of historic rehabilitation and operational improvements than Alternative 1. Alternative 2 would also reorganize the space program in areas already affected by proposed actions to facilitate best operational practices. The visitor experience would be substantially improved as well with designs that are compatible with the historic character of the spaces affected.

Like Alternative 1, Alternative 2 proposes historic rehabilitation of features throughout the hotel and cottages that are rated in *The Ahwahnee Historic Structures Report* (ARG 2011) as being in “poor” condition, but in addition includes rehabilitation and preservation of historic fabric and features in “fair” condition in spaces that are considered historically “very significant” and “significant.” In addition, Alternative 2 includes implementation of non-maintenance treatment recommendations from *The Ahwahnee Historic Structures Report* (ARG 2011) in “contributing” and “historic utilitarian” spaces.

An additional goal of Alternative 2 is to improve energy and water-use efficiency by using measures that would have minimal impact on the building and site.

Alternative 3 (Preferred)

Alternative 3, the NPS preferred alternative, comprises actions selected from either or both of Alternative 1 and Alternative 2, or developed separately. The overall goals of the alternative are to provide the most cost-efficient means of addressing fire, seismic, life-safety, health, and accessibility code and standard deficiencies; improving obsolete building systems and operational efficiency; and improving visitor experience while minimizing impacts on historic fabric and features to the maximum extent practicable.

Like Alternative 1, Alternative 3 proposes historic rehabilitation of features throughout the hotel and cottages that are rated in *The Ahwahnee Historic Structures Report* (ARG 2011) as being in “poor” condition, but in addition includes rehabilitation and preservation of historic fabric and features in “fair” condition in spaces that are considered historically “very significant” and “significant.”

Environmental Analysis

Chapter 3 of this document presents the Affected Environment and the Environmental Consequences for The Ahwahnee Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan Environmental Assessment, which fulfills the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act and the National Historic Preservation Act. The Affected Environment section under each resource topic discussed in Chapter 3 describes the existing conditions of the resource in areas that would be affected by the project. The Environmental Consequences section under each resource topic discussed in Chapter 3 analyzes the potential environmental effects associated with each of the alternatives described in Chapter 2. Table 2-1 in Chapter 2 presents a summary comparison of the Environmental Consequences of each alternative.

Environmentally Preferable Alternative

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations implementing NEPA and the National Park Service NEPA guidelines require that “the alternative or alternatives which were considered to be environmentally preferable” be identified (CEQ Regulations, section 1505.2).

Environmentally preferable is defined as “the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in NEPA section 101. Ordinarily, this means the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative that best protects, preserves, and enhances historic, cultural, and natural resources” (CEQ 1981).

Upon full consideration of the elements of section 101 of NEPA, Alternative 3 represents the environmentally preferable alternative for The Ahwahnee Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan. This conclusion is analyzed in detail in Chapter 2.

Consultation and Coordination Process

Public scoping was initiated for The Ahwahnee Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan Environmental Assessment on August 13, 2009. The National Park Service accepted public scoping comments through September 26, 2009. The park received eight comment letters from seven individuals and one organization during the public scoping period. These letters generated 21 individual concern statements that were incorporated into a Public Scoping Concerns Report, which was used to guide the development of project alternatives. The 2009 *Public Scoping Concerns Report* prepared for The Ahwahnee Comprehensive Rehabilitation Plan, as well as copies of the original comments, can be reviewed online at: http://www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/ahwahnee_rehab.htm.

Internal scoping and consultation with other government agencies and culturally associated American Indian tribes and groups informed the planning process.

The public outreach called for in NHPA section 106 was integrated with the NEPA process described above, in accordance with the *Programmatic Agreement Among the National Park Service at Yosemite, the California State Historic Preservation Officer, and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation Regarding Planning, Design, Construction, Operations, and Maintenance, Yosemite National Park, California* (1999 Programmatic Agreement) (NPS 1999) and the *Programmatic Agreement Between the National Park Service, Yosemite National Park and the California State Historic Preservation Officer Regarding The Ahwahnee Hotel National Historic Landmark Comprehensive Rehabilitation Program, Mariposa County, California* (2011 Programmatic Agreement) (NPS and SHPO 2011). In addition, the 2011 Programmatic Agreement was released for public review in January 2011.