

**Northwest Aviation Operations
Draft Finding of No Significant Impact
Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington**

Pursuant to the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations (40 CFR [Code of Federal Regulations] Parts 1500-1508) for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA; 42 United States Code [U.S.C.] 4321 et seq.) and the U.S. Department of the Army (Army) Regulation found in 32 CFR Part 651 (*Environmental Analysis of Army Actions*), Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM) has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) and Errata, which have been incorporated by reference, of the potential environmental effects associated with aviation training by the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) in Oregon and Washington.

Purpose and Need

Aerial refueling is an important component of military operations, because it allows for extended flight times. Aerial refueling capability and proficiency are critical to the long-range mission capability of the 160th SOAR. However, the 160th SOAR currently lacks a sufficient number of published aerial refueling routes to accomplish its training requirements. The available published routes are either too far from JBLM and thus too costly to use in terms of fuel consumption, or too short, making them less-than-optimal for the unit's training needs. Additionally, the 160th SOAR lacks a suitable published instrument rules (IR) route for conducting terrain-following (TF) training using multi-mode radar (MMR), which is a combat need. Furthermore, the 160th SOAR currently has limited opportunities for low-level training. The objective of the Army's proposed activities is to provide the 160th SOAR with the airspace and route dynamics necessary to accomplish training requirements and maintain mission readiness, thus enabling the regiment to accomplish its peacetime and wartime missions in a timely and safe manner.

Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, the Army would publish three new aerial refueling routes, extend one existing published refueling route, establish a low-level flight training area southeast of JBLM, and establish a new MMR training route. The three new refueling routes would originate over land west of JBLM, and two of the routes would end over the Pacific Ocean. The extended route would begin and end over land in Oregon, and a parallel existing refueling route in Oregon would also be used. Refueling activities would involve from two to ten aircraft, consisting of MH-60 Blackhawk and MH-47 Chinook helicopters, and one C-130 tanker. Training sessions along refueling routes would last approximately three hours, and would occur approximately 50 times per year on each route.

The proposed 496,500-acre low-level training area would be located southeast of JBLM, mostly above/within the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. Training activities in this area would consist of various mission-essential tasks that involve flying at low altitudes, including take-offs and landings. Ten helicopter landing zones have been identified for use within this proposed training area. Training events

within the low-level training area would involve one to two helicopters, and would occur approximately 60 times per year.

TF/MMR would occur along a new IR route between JBLM and Yakima Training Center (JBLM-YTC). Use of the route would include flying to JBLM-YTC during inclement weather, and the use of on-board radar to maintain a fixed distance above the ground under conditions of limited visibility. Use of this route would occur approximately 60 times per year.

While the EA identifies ten proposed helicopter landing zones, one of these, MARK09, has since been removed from consideration as a landing zone due to land use restrictions in this area.

Alternatives Considered

As prescribed by CEQ regulations, in addition to the Proposed Action, the EA also evaluated the No Action alternative, under which the 160th SOAR would not conduct off-post training; and a second action alternative, under which existing published routes would be used to support aviation training in the region.

Factors Considered in Determining that No Environmental Impact Statement is Required

The EA, which is attached and incorporated by reference into this Finding of No Significant Impact (FNSI), examined the potential effects of the proposed action on areas of environmental concern, consisting of: Land use; airspace use and safety; noise; air quality; soils; cultural resources; wetlands and water resources; recreation, visual resources, wilderness areas and wild and scenic rivers; biological resources (vegetation, aquatic resources and fish, and wildlife resources); and environmental justice and protection of children. The Army's Proposed Action would result in insignificant effects to areas of environmental concern, provided identified mitigation measures are implemented.

The only use of land under the Proposed Action would be in the low-level training area, where proposed landing zones are generally compatible with surrounding land uses, and are located away from populated areas. Use of proposed training routes would be coordinated with appropriate Air Route Traffic Control Centers to avoid airspace use conflicts, and use of the proposed low-level training area would be coordinated with the Forest Aviation Office. The proposed aviation operations would entail safety risks, which include accidents, releases of fuel, and bird aircraft strikes. These risks would be minimized by adhering to safety protocols detailed in Army Regulation 385-10, *The Army Safety Program*, and applicable Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) orders; and avoiding areas of severe bird strike risk, which are detailed in the mitigation section of this FNSI and the EA.

Use of helicopters and C-130 tankers during training exercises would generate noise at decibel levels that are likely to cause some annoyance to populations in areas beneath or near routes, particular during nighttime training events. Where possible, pilots would "fly friendly", which requires them—when weather and other operating conditions allow—to fly no lower than 500 feet above ground level (AGL)

and to avoid noise sensitive areas (including residential areas, schools, hospitals, and parks) when traveling to and from the training routes/area. When these populated and/or noise sensitive areas cannot be avoided, aircraft would fly at 2,000 feet AGL—again, when conditions are safe to do so. Aircraft noise would also potentially annoy people in non-populated areas that are used for recreation, such as wilderness areas and National Parks. These effects would not be significant, provided that pilots flying to and from routes avoid wilderness areas or fly over them at altitudes of 2,000 feet AGL or higher.

Effects to visual resources would be infrequent and of short duration, consisting primarily of the presence of aircraft in areas with daytime scenic views, and nighttime intrusions associated with helicopter lights (red/green/strobe).

Since the total number of aircraft flight hours would not change from baseline levels, air quality impacts would be limited to redistribution of some annual aircraft emissions from JBLM and JBLM-YTC to the proposed routes in the project area. Emission increases in off-post areas would not exceed conformity thresholds.

The potential for release of fuel during training mishaps would present risks to soils, vegetation, and aquatic habitats and species, and wildlife within the project area. Based on the 160th SOAR's history of fuel releases (three worldwide since 1972) and the small quantity of fuel that would potentially be released, these risks are minimal. Other potential effects to biological resources would include noise disturbances to wildlife. Based on the infrequency of the training and the limited duration of the aircraft noise, these effects would not be significant, provided the mitigation measures for protecting listed species are implemented.

Aircraft noise would not be loud enough to cause structural damage to historic structures, and at the proposed frequency of training would not alter the setting, feeling, or historic association of cultural resources. No historic properties, traditional cultural properties, sacred sites, or areas of contemporary traditional use are known to be present at the proposed landing zones. The Army will continue to consult with the tribes to ensure that the Proposed Action would not significantly affect traditional cultural properties. Since minority and low income populations do not occur disproportionately beneath training routes and/or approaches, and no substantial environmental or health impacts would be associated with the Proposed Action, disproportionate adverse effects to these populations would not occur. No substantial environmental or health impacts are associated with the proposed aviation activities, thus disproportionate adverse effects to children would also not occur.

The Army's Proposed Action could contribute to adverse cumulative effects on the environment that result from past, present, and future actions through increased noise and air traffic, increased bird airstrike risks, increased disturbance of wildlife, and increased risks for accidental contamination of natural resources in the region through releases of fuel. Identified mitigation measures are expected to prevent any cumulative effects from becoming significant.

As part of the Proposed Action, the Army would implement appropriate Best Management Practices (BMPs), as identified in the EA, that minimize impacts to numerous resource areas. These BMPs include such actions as following appropriate safety procedures, avoiding low-altitude flight above noise sensitive areas, keeping one pilot focused outside the aircraft at all times, washing weed propagules from helicopters, doing fly-overs to check for people and wildlife before using landing zones, and continuing to consult with tribes in the project area. Additionally, the following mitigation is required to avoid significant adverse impacts to wilderness, and fish and wildlife, and to minimize significant health and safety risks:

- Between March 1st and July 31st, maintain minimum helicopter flight altitudes of 400 feet above treetop level in the vicinity of Northern Spotted Owl nests. These restrictions apply to the TF/MMR route and much of the low-level training area, including travel to and from the proposed landing zones. Clearly label Northern Spotted Owl centers on pilots' maps to ensure that these areas are avoided.
- Between April 1st and September 15th, maintain minimum helicopter flight altitudes of 400 feet above treetop level within the area of potential Marbled Murrelet presence. These restrictions apply to the applicable portions of the TF/MMR route and the low-level training area (including landing zone CONF3).
- When flying between JBLM and the training routes/area, avoid wilderness areas or fly over them at a minimum altitude of 2,000 feet AGL. This restriction should be clearly labeled on flight maps.
- During activities in the low-level training area, avoid the Mount Adams Wilderness.
- During refueling activities along route AR305, avoid the Badger Creek Wilderness, either by maintaining a minimum altitude of 2,000 feet AGL in this area, or by flying within the portion of the route buffer that does not pass over the wilderness area.
- From October 22nd through March 25th, avoid Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge (approximately 10 miles north of Portland, Oregon) when flying between JBLM and the training routes/area. During this time period, bird strike risk in this area is classified as severe by the Bird Avoidance Model.
- From December 3rd through February 11th, avoid Baskett Slough National Wildlife Refuge (approximately 10 miles west of Salem, Oregon) when flying between JBLM and the training routes/area. During this time period, bird strike risk in this area is classified as severe by the Bird Avoidance Model.

Note that for all flight restrictions, the sudden onset of adverse weather conditions may require pilots to fly lower than specified to ensure the safety of aircraft crewmembers and people on the ground.

Conclusion

Based on the EA, it has been determined that the Proposed Action will have no significant direct, indirect, or cumulative impacts on the quality of the natural or human environment, provided appropriate mitigation measures are put in place. Consultation has concluded with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service, and their findings are included in the appendices to the EA. Consultation with the National Marine Fisheries Service will be reinitiated after 10 years. Furthermore,

the proposed action will not proceed until consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer and a full review of federal consistency with the Coastal Zone Management Act is complete. Because no significant environmental impacts will result from the proposed action, an Environmental Impact Statement is not required and will not be prepared.

Public Comment

The EA and Draft FNSI are available for review and comment for 30 days. Comments will be received via email until November 19, 2012, or by mail postmarked up to this date. Copies of the EA and Draft FNSI may be obtained by accessing the Joint Base Lewis-McChord Public Works website at: http://www.lewis-mcchord.army.mil/publicworks/sites/envir/eia_soar.htm. The documentation has been provided to the Salem Public Library, Gresham Library, Hollywood Library, Midland Library, Hillsdale Library, and Redmond Public Library in Oregon; and the Mountain View Timberland Library, Aberdeen Timberland Library, Vernetta Smith Chehalis Timberland Library, Pierce County Library, Timberland Library, Graham Library, Rainier Library, and Yelm Library in Washington. Comments on the EA and this Draft FNSI should be submitted to the JBLM Environmental Division by email at usarmy.jblm.imcom.list.dpw-eis@mail.mil, by facsimile to (253) 966-4985, or by mail to:

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