

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

FOR

MARITIME WEAPONS SYSTEM EVALUATION PROGRAM EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE, FLORIDA

Contract No. W91278-11-D-0009
Task Order No. 0007
RCS 14-260

This finding, and the analysis upon which it is based, was prepared pursuant to the President's Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and its implementing regulations as promulgated at 40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 1500 (40 CFR 1500-1508), as well as the U.S. Air Force Environmental Impact Analysis Process as promulgated at 32 CFR Part 989.

The Department of the Air Force has conducted an Environmental Assessment (EA) of the potential environmental consequences associated with the conduct of live ordnance testing in the Gulf of Mexico (GOM) as part of the 86th Fighter Weapons Squadron (86 FWS) Air-to-Ground Weapons System Evaluation Program (WSEP). That EA (December 2014) is hereby incorporated by reference into this finding.

PURPOSE AND NEED (EA Section 1.4, page 1-1)

The purpose of the action is to continue the development of tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) for U.S. Air Force strike aircraft to counter small maneuvering maritime targets in order to better protect U.S. and other vessels or assets from small boat threats. Damage effects of these conditions must be known to generate TTPs to engage small moving boats. The test objectives are to (1) develop TTPs to engage small boats in all weather; and (2) determine the impact of TTPs on Combat Air Force (CAF) training. The 53d Wing will use the results of the test to develop publishable TTPs for inclusion in Air Force TTP 3-1 series manuals. Maritime WSEP testing is a high national defense priority.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

Proposed Action (EA Section 2.1, page 2-1)

The Proposed Action is for the 86 FWS proponent to test multiple types of live munitions in the Eglin Gulf Test and Training Range (EGTTR) against small boat targets, for the Maritime WSEP. The initial phases of the Maritime WSEP focused on detecting and tracking boats using various sensors, simulated weapons engagements, and testing with inert (containing no explosives) munitions. These actions were reviewed under the Eglin Environmental Impact Analysis Process and categorically excluded (CATEXed) off the *Eglin Gulf Test and Training Range Programmatic Environmental Assessment*, RCS 97-048, and Air to Ground and Maritime WSEP CATEX RCS 14-019. The Proposed Action represents the final phase of testing the effectiveness of live (containing explosive charges) munitions on small boat threats and provides additional discussion on vessel swarm missions in Choctawhatchee Bay. Live munitions testing

in the EGTRR would include two fuzing options: detonation above the water surface and at the water surface. The Proposed Action does not include subsurface detonations.

Alternative 1: Subsurface Hellfire Missiles (Preferred Alternative) (EA Section 2.2.1, page 2-10)

Under Alternative 1, which is the Preferred Alternative, the same number and type of ordnance would be expended at the same location as that of the Proposed Action, with the exception that Alternative 1 proposes a subsurface detonation as opposed to a surface detonation scenario for Hellfire Missiles.

No Action Alternative (EA Section 2.2.2, page 2-10)

Under the No Action Alternative, Maritime WSEP testing would not occur at Eglin AFB. The program would not achieve objectives of developing effective methods to counter small boat threats from the air.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Analysis was conducted to determine the potential impacts to the human and natural environment resulting from the Proposed Action; Alternative 1, Subsurface Hellfire Missiles; and the No Action Alternative. No significant impacts to resources have been identified (EA Chapter 3, pages 3-1 to 3-66). In addition, there would be no significant cumulative impacts caused by implementation of Alternative 1 (Preferred Alternative) when combined with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable actions that could affect safety and GOM access, socioeconomics, physical resources, and biological resources (EA Chapter 4, pages 4-1 to 4-7).

Safety/Restricted Access (EA Section 3.1.3, pages 3-2 to 3-6)

There would be no significant impacts due to safety or restricted access under any of the alternatives. Nonparticipating vessels and persons would be informed to remain clear of the mission area by use of Notices to Mariners (NOTMARs), fliers, and range safety personnel in vessels in East Pass and along the safety perimeter, who would advise nonparticipating vessels on alternate courses to take. As needed, clearance by the Eglin Air Force Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team would be required for military and civilian personnel to re-enter target areas.

Socioeconomics (EA Section 3.2.3, pages 3-10 to 3-11)

There would be no significant socioeconomic impacts. Closure of the range area would typically last less than half a day during the weekdays and would not significantly impact recreational or commercial fishing. Advanced notification and continued use of communication services during the test event would minimize adverse impacts by allowing vessels opportunities to plan to use alternate areas. Additionally, the 96 RANSS employs some local charter vessels to help maintain the safety perimeter, and as participants in Swarm missions. Additionally, no disproportionate impacts to low-income communities, minorities, or children have been identified under the Proposed Action.

Physical Resources (EA Section 3.3.3, pages 3-12 to 3-15)

There would be no significant impacts to physical resources. Impacts to water column and substrate quality would be minor. Detonations would not be of sufficient strength to cause seafloor cratering. Scouring of the seafloor by debris pieces would be minor.

Biological Resources (EA Section 3.4.3, pages 3-48 to 3-66)

There would be no significant impacts to biological resources. Marine fish may be injured or killed by detonations, but the number is expected to be negligible relative to overall populations. Maritime WSEP activities would occur outside the principal distribution range of fish species protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and Gulf sturgeon critical habitat would not be affected. Essential fish habitat would not be significantly impacted. Known hardbottom habitats and artificial reefs would not be affected. Significant impacts to marine birds, including ESA-listed and migratory species, are not expected. Marine mammals and sea turtles could be exposed to noise or pressure levels resulting in injury or harassment. Less than one mortality is calculated for the Proposed Action and Alternative 1. Mitigation measures would decrease the potential for impacts. Consultation with the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and issuance of an Incidental Harassment Authorization (IHA) would be obtained before activities commenced.

REGULATIONS, PLANS, AND PERMITS (EA Section 5.1, page 5-1)

- Marine Mammal Protection Act Incidental Harassment Authorization.
- Eglin AFB initiated consultation with NMFS pursuant to the ESA through preparation of a Biological Assessment; subsequently, NMFS prepared a Biological Opinion regarding the effects of Maritime WSEP test activities.
- Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA) Consistency Determination (Appendix A, Coastal Zone Management Act Consistency Determination).

MANAGEMENT ACTIONS (EA Section 5.2, pages 5-1 to 5-2)

The proponent is responsible for implementation of the following management actions.

Safety/Restricted Access (EA Section 5.2.1, page 5-1)

- Establish and maintain human safety buffer zones.
- As needed, EOD teams would deem safe boat targets and dispose of any unexploded ordnance (UXO).

Socioeconomics (EA Section 5.2.2, page 5-2)

- Avoid range closures during holidays and special events such as fishing tournaments.
- Continue to provide advanced notification to users through NOTMARs and other media sources to timely inform users of training times and dates so that their activities can be planned accordingly.

Physical Resources (EA Section 5.2.3, page 5-2)

- No management actions have been identified for physical resources.

Biological Resources (EA Section 5.2.4, page 5-2; Appendix B)

- Avoid known hardbottom and artificial reef locations.
- In addition, a detailed plan has been developed to mitigate potential impacts to marine mammals and sea turtles, both of which are protected under federal law (Marine Mammal Protection Act [MMPA] and ESA). This plan is included in the associated Maritime WSEP IHA request and Biological Assessment.
- Visual monitoring would be required during Maritime WSEP missions from surface vessels and high-definition video cameras.
 - Trained marine species observers would be aboard at least two of these boats and would conduct species surveys before each test.
 - The area to be surveyed would encompass the largest applicable zone of influence, based on the particular ordnance involved in a given test.
 - Observers would be required to leave the test area 30 minutes in advance of live weapon deployment. Observers would continue to scan for protected marine species from the safety zone periphery, but effectiveness would be limited as the boat would remain at a designated safety station
 - Mission-related personnel would be within the test area (on boats and the instrumentation barge) on each day of testing well in advance of weapon deployment, typically near sunrise. These personnel would perform a variety of tasks including target preparation, equipment checks, etc., and would opportunistically observe for protected marine species and indicators as feasible throughout test preparation.
 - In addition to vessel-based monitoring, one to three video cameras would be positioned on an instrumentation barge anchored on-site. In addition to monitoring the area for test-specific issues, the camera(s) would also be used to monitor for the presence of protected species. A marine species observer would be located in the Eglin control tower, along with mission personnel, to view the video feed before and during test activities.
- Weather that supports the ability to observe protected marine species is required to effectively implement the surveys.
 - Maritime WSEP missions would be delayed or rescheduled if the sea state is greater than moderate breeze, winds 11 to 16 knots; wave height 3.5 to 6 feet; breaking crests, numerous whitecaps at the time of the test.
 - The test event would occur no earlier than two hours after sunrise and no later than two hours prior to sunset to ensure adequate daylight for pre- and post-mission monitoring.
- The survey team would consist of a combination of Air Force and civil service/civilian personnel.

- Vessel-based and video monitoring would be conducted during all test missions (maximum of two missions per day).
- The Eglin Range Safety Officer, in cooperation with the Santa Rosa Island Tower Control, would coordinate and manage all species observation efforts.
- Marine mammal sightings and other applicable information would be communicated to tower control.
- The Safety Officer and tower control would also be in continual contact with the test director throughout the mission and would coordinate information regarding range clearing.
- Final decisions regarding mission execution, including possible test delay or relocation based on marine species sightings, would be the responsibility of the safety officer, with concurrence from the test director.
- Post-detonation monitoring surveys would be conducted by the same survey personnel that conducted pre-mission surveys and would commence as soon as EOD personnel declare the test area safe. Local coordinators may report stranding data to state and regional coordinators. Any observed dead or injured marine mammal or sea turtle would be reported to the appropriate coordinator.

PUBLIC NOTIFICATION

A public notice was published in the *Northwest Florida Daily News* on 6 November 2014, inviting the public to review and comment on the Draft EA and Draft Finding of No Significant Impact. The public comment period closed on 22 November 2014, and no public comments were received. State agency comments were received and have been addressed in Appendix D, *Public Review*, of the Final EA.

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on my review of the facts and the environmental analysis contained in Alternative 1, the Preferred Alternative of the EA, and as summarized above, I find that the proposed decision of the Air Force to conduct live ordnance testing in the Gulf of Mexico as part of the 86 FWS Maritime Weapons System Evaluation Program, will not have a significant impact on the human or natural environment; therefore, an environmental impact statement is not required. This analysis fulfills the requirements of the NEPA, the President's CEQ, and 32 CFR Part 989.


 SHAWN D. MOORE, Colonel, USAF
 Commander, 96th Civil Engineer Group

9 Dec 2014
 Date