

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Department of the Navy

Record of Decision for the Proposed Modernization and Expansion
of Townsend Bombing Range, Georgia

AGENCY: Department of the Navy, DoD

ACTION: Notice of Record of Decision.

SUMMARY: Pursuant to Section (102)(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 (42 United States Code [U.S.C.] Sections 4321-4370h); as implemented by the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (Title 40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] Parts 1500-1508); Department of the Navy (DON) regulations (32 CFR Part 775); and United States Marine Corps (USMC) NEPA procedures (Marine Corps Order P5090.2A), the DON announces its decision to modernize and expand Townsend Bombing Range (TBR) in Long and McIntosh Counties, Georgia. The DON has decided to implement Alternative

4, the Preferred Alternative, to include acquisition of Acquisition Areas 1B and 3.

To support this decision, DON will implement the following four actions: (1) acquire Acquisition Areas 1B and 3 (28,630 acres); (2) terminate a 3,007-acre timber easement held by McIntosh County on DON-owned land within the current TBR boundary; (3) modify Restricted Area R-3007 airspace by extending the current 100-foot floor to ground level over the land to be acquired (Acquisition Areas 1B and 3) to match the existing restricted airspace over the current range; and (4) construct infrastructure to support precision-guided munitions (PGM) training, including Target Areas 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8. This modernization and expansion of TBR to accommodate inert PGM training will significantly enhance USMC east coast aviation unit training efficiency. Presently, TBR can accommodate only 47% of the required F/A-18 Hornet individual fixed-wing air crew air-to-ground training syllabus. The Proposed Action will allow air crews to meet up to 85% of their air-to-ground proficiency requirements at TBR. All practical means to avoid or minimize environmental impacts resulting from implementation of the Preferred Alternative that were identified in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) have been adopted.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Captain Jordan Cochran, 596 Geiger Blvd. Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Beaufort, SC 29904 at 843-228-6123.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: The DON announces its decision to modernize and expand TBR in Long and McIntosh Counties, Georgia, through the implementation of the Preferred Alternative. The Preferred Alternative represents the optimal balance between the operational utility and the potential impacts to the environment.

The Proposed Action includes the acquisition of 28,630 acres of land in McIntosh County (8,520 acres) and Long County (20,110 acres), Georgia, to provide an up-to-date air-to-ground training range on the east coast that can safely accommodate the use of inert (non-explosive) PGM and the larger safety zones their use requires, along with the inert weapons currently used at TBR.

Like the inert weapons currently used at TBR, PGM to be used at TBR will be inert, only armed with a small marking smoke charge, and weigh 500, 1,000, or 2,000 pounds. PGM will be either satellite-guided or laser-guided. A sufficiently sized land area at TBR will maintain public safety, enable the required training

delivery of inert PGM, and allow for more realistic and effective training on a wider array of target types for greater aircrew competency. The Proposed Action includes terminating a 3,007-acre timber easement held by McIntosh County on DON-owned land within the current TBR boundary. DON will pay fair market value to McIntosh County to terminate this easement. Restricted Area R-3007 airspace will be modified by extending the current 100-foot floor to ground level only over the land to be acquired (Acquisition Areas 1B and 3) to match the existing restricted airspace over the current range. The purpose of this additional airspace is to unite the airspace with acquired land to enable the delivery of inert ordnance and to exclude non-participating aircraft from intruding into hazardous operations, as required by Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations. The modernization will also include the construction of infrastructure to support PGM training, including the installation of target scoring equipment, facility and/or tower construction, and roadway construction/improvement. Six new target areas will be constructed: Target Areas 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8. This action will allow the enhancement of current training capabilities by accommodating full-scale inert weapons; enabling the use of inert PGM; and increasing weapons delivery parameters by providing multiple run-in headings (i.e., aircraft

direction during ordnance delivery). Modernizing TBR to accommodate inert PGM training will significantly enhance east coast aviation unit training efficiency. Presently, TBR can accommodate only 47% of the required F/A-18 Hornet individual fixed-wing air crew air-to-ground training syllabus. The Proposed Action will allow air crews to meet up to 85% of their air-to-ground proficiency requirements at TBR. Implementation of this action will be accomplished as set out in the Preferred Alternative as described in the Final EIS. All practical means to avoid or minimize environmental harm from the Preferred Alternative that were identified in the EIS have been adopted.

PURPOSE AND NEED: The purpose of the Proposed Action is to provide an air-to-ground training range capable of providing a wider variety of air-to-ground operations, including the use of PGM, to meet training requirements. The Proposed Action is needed to more efficiently meet current training requirements for east coast based USMC aviation assets by significantly increasing air-to-ground training capabilities in the Beaufort, South Carolina region.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT: The USMC initiated a mutual exchange of information through early and open communication with interested

groups and individuals starting on August 6, 2010, with the publication of a Notice of Intent (NOI) in the Federal Register (75 FR 47564). The NOI announced a 30-day public scoping period, which ended on September 7, 2010. To ensure receipt of all public scoping comments after a clerical error, an additional 30-day public scoping period was held from October 10 to November 8, 2010. Two public scoping meetings were held during this time: the first on August 24, 2010, in Ludowici, Georgia, and the second on August 26, 2010, in Darien, Georgia. During the two 30-day scoping periods, the USMC received 110 comments that helped identify public concerns to be analyzed in the Draft EIS.

On July 13, 2012, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) published a Notice of Availability (NOA) for the Draft EIS in the Federal Register (77 FR 41402). Concurrently, the USMC published a Notice of Public Meetings in the Federal Register on July 13, 2012 (77 FR 41385). The NOA identified a public comment period from July 13 to August 27, 2012; this was later extended to September 27, 2012. The Draft EIS was circulated for review and comment to government agencies, local organizations, tribal nations, and interested private citizens. The NOA was also published in local newspapers and posted on the project website

(www.townsendbombingrangeeis.com). The notice also listed the public libraries where the Draft EIS was available. The USMC held public meetings on August 7, 2012 in Darien, Georgia, and on August 9, 2012 in Ludowici, Georgia. Five federal agencies, five state agencies, eight local agencies, three tribal nations, and 79 citizens and organizations submitted comments during the review period. All 100 public comments were reviewed by the USMC and addressed in the Final EIS.

The EPA published a NOA for the Final EIS in the Federal Register (78 FR 17644) on March 22, 2013. The Final EIS was distributed to federal, state and local agencies, elected officials, and other interested parties. The public was afforded an opportunity to submit comments on the Final EIS during a 30-day wait period from March 22 to April 22, 2013.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED: The USMC conducted a multi-step screening process to identify candidate ranges and alternatives that met the purpose and need. To achieve this, the USMC (1) developed range evaluation criteria by identifying key physical and operational attributes required to support training with PGM; (2) identified existing candidate DOD ranges in the southeastern United States; and (3) evaluated the candidate

ranges against the range evaluation criteria. Results identified seven candidate ranges that were subjected to initial analysis. Only TBR satisfied all of the screening criteria and was carried forward for full analysis in the EIS.

The USMC analyzed four action alternatives: Alternative 1, Alternative 2, Alternative 3, and Alternative 4. The USMC also analyzed a No Action Alternative. The No Action Alternative assumes the USMC would not acquire any land for training purposes, and training operations at TBR would not change; therefore, the No Action Alternative does not meet the purpose and need of the Proposed Action. All four action alternatives include the acquisition of land, the termination of a timber easement, the modification of existing airspace, and the construction of infrastructure to support PGM training.

The USMC developed three potential land acquisition areas: "Acquisition Area 1A," "Acquisition Area 1B," and "Acquisition Area 3." Each of the four action alternatives includes a different combination of these acquisition areas. The four action alternatives also feature different combinations of Target Areas 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8. All four action alternatives include the installation of target scoring

equipment, facility and/or tower construction, and roadway construction/improvement.

Alternative 1 includes the acquisition of Acquisition Areas 1A and 1B (11,187 acres) and the construction of Target Areas 6, 7, and 8. Alternative 2 includes Acquisition Area 3 (23,674 acres) and new Target Areas 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. Alternative 3 includes Acquisition Areas 1A, 1B, and 3 (34,861 acres) and the construction of Target Areas 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

Alternative 4 includes Acquisition Areas 1B and 3 (28,630 acres) and Target Areas 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8. Alternative 1 is the only action alternative that involves the relocation of the existing range compound facilities and observation tower to the northern corner of Acquisition Area 1B. Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 do not involve the relocation of existing facilities but includes the construction of a new observation tower in the southwestern corner of Acquisition Area 3.

All four action alternatives include terminating a 3,007-acre timber easement held by McIntosh County on DON-owned land within the current TBR boundary. To ensure the safety of TBR personnel and the public, it is necessary for the USMC to own all the timberland within the range and to manage it in support of

mission requirements. The USMC will pay fair market value to McIntosh County to terminate this easement. All four action alternatives also include the modification of existing airspace. Restricted Area R-3007 airspace will be modified by extending the current 100-foot floor to ground level over the land to be acquired (per the land acquisition areas for each alternative) to match the existing restricted airspace over the current range.

DON selected Alternative 4 as the Preferred Alternative. Alternative 4 best meets the purpose and need of the Proposed Action and balances environmental impacts with mission requirements. Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 would all allow air crews to meet up to 85% of their air-to-ground proficiency requirements at TBR. Alternative 2 represents the Environmentally Preferred Alternative (per 40 CFR 1505.2[b]), as it will allow for a moderate acquisition of acreage without any impacts to non-commercial forestland property owners.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS: The DON prepared an EIS to evaluate the potential environmental impacts associated with each alternative carried forward for analysis. The EIS assessed the following resource areas: land use; socioeconomics; recreation; wetlands;

water resources; airspace; noise; biological resources; cultural resources; air quality; transportation; topography, geology, and soils; utilities and infrastructure; and hazardous materials and waste. The Preferred Alternative will not result in impacts that exceed regulatory standards and will be implemented consistent with existing plans, programs, and standards. Implementation of the Preferred Alternative will have a significant impact on socioeconomics. The USMC consulted with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, Georgia State Historic Preservation Officer, and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources Coastal Resources Division.

Socioeconomics

The socioeconomic analysis evaluated several different factors that could affect the quality of life and economy in the area surrounding the proposed acquisition area. The socioeconomic analysis included the following factors: displacement of residents and businesses; environmental justice and protection of children; economic impact from construction and operation; timber harvesting income, sales taxes, and jobs in the forestry industry; local property tax revenues; and community services.

The proposed land acquisitions under the Preferred Alternative will reduce the total assessed value of taxable real property within Long and McIntosh Counties, along with associated timber sales and local tax revenues related to the sale of timber products. Land acquisition under the Preferred Alternative is estimated to reduce annual real property tax revenues by approximately 0.6% (\$35,469) in McIntosh County and 3.4% (\$131,318) in Long County. The USMC will also terminate a timber easement held by McIntosh County via purchase at fair market value on approximately 3,007 acres of DON-owned land within the current TBR boundary. Under the Preferred Alternative, estimates show a reduction in timber sales taxes by \$151,987 in McIntosh County and \$458,076 in Long County over a period of 30 to 50 years. When considered in conjunction with the past, present, and foreseeable future projects, socioeconomic impacts on taxes and revenue are expected to be significant.

The socioeconomic analysis also determined that the Preferred Alternative will not displace any residents or businesses. In addition, the Preferred Alternative will not have a disproportionate impact on minority, low-income, or children populations and therefore will not have an effect on environmental justice and the protection of children. During

implementation of the Preferred Alternative, DON expenditures on construction, maintenance, and operations will benefit the local and regional economy. The Preferred Alternative will provide some minor beneficial impacts to employment through the creation of temporary jobs during construction, followed by permanent jobs for operation and maintenance. Potential offsets including acquisition, construction, and additional survey work will provide direct and indirect benefits to the local and state economy; new jobs will provide a minor, long-term benefit to the region; and access to a PGM-capable range will benefit Georgia Air National Guard (GAANG) readiness training. However, no significant increases to employment and income are expected as a result of the Preferred Alternative.

Biological Resources

Threatened and endangered species surveys were conducted in spring 2011 for the eastern indigo snake, frosted flatwoods salamander, wood stork, striped newt, and gopher tortoise. The USMC submitted a determination of effects on threatened and endangered species to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on August 2, 2011, to which the USFWS provided concurrence on September 22, 2011. Consultation determined that no effects will occur to the Bachman's warbler, Kirtland's

warbler, bald eagle, frosted flatwoods salamander, striped newt, or hairy rattlesnake as result of the Proposed Action. The USFWS also concurred with the USMC determination that the Proposed Action may affect, but will not likely adversely affect, the eastern indigo snake, gopher tortoise, and wood stork.

MITIGATION MEASURES: No mitigation was required following the completion of regulatory consultations. With respect to wetlands, 9,841.2 acres of wetland environments currently exist within the acquisition areas. Wetlands will be avoided to the maximum extent practicable; however, some wetlands will be unavoidably impacted. The precise scope of direct and indirect impacts will be defined at a later time when the target array areas are designed. A subsequent environmental evaluation will be conducted as part of any permitting action that may be needed.

Socioeconomic Impact Mitigation

As noted above, the proposed land acquisitions under the Preferred Alternative will reduce the total assessed value of taxable real property within Long and McIntosh Counties, along with associated timber sales and local tax revenues related to the sale of timber products. Land acquisition under the Preferred Alternative is estimated to reduce annual real

property tax revenues by approximately 0.6% (\$35,469) in McIntosh County and 3.4% (\$131,318) in Long County.

The USMC will also terminate a timber easement held by McIntosh County via purchase at fair market value on approximately 3,007 acres of DON-owned land within the current TBR boundary. Under the Preferred Alternative, estimates show a reduction in timber sales taxes by \$151,987 in McIntosh County and \$458,076 in Long County over a period of 30 to 50 years. This loss will be partially mitigated through income from USMC timber sales. Under 10 U.S.C. 2665 and DOD Financial Management Regulation 7000.14-R, 40% of the net proceeds from military timber sales shall be distributed to the state that includes the military installation from which the forest products were sold. The USMC reports the amount of the net proceeds to the counties from which the forest products were sold and, in practice, states provide those funds back to the counties.

The DON has acknowledged this potential loss of tax revenues to local governments resulting from the Proposed Action and recognizes tax loss as a significant impact to both Long and McIntosh Counties. There are no legal mechanisms by which the DON can compensate local governments for the loss of tax

revenues resulting from the conversion of privately owned lands to federal ownership. In addition to the potential offsets discussed in the socioeconomics section of this ROD that will provide both short and long-term benefits to the region, these losses may be indirectly mitigated through the potential development of mutual support agreements with Long and McIntosh Counties and related construction of fire and emergency response facilities that are necessary because of the TBR expansion.

CUMULATIVE EFFECTS: The past, present, or future actions having the potential to contribute to cumulative effects were identified in the Final EIS. To ensure a thorough assessment of potential cumulative effects, the analysis in the Final EIS sought information on past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions, both federal and non-federal. Land use, socioeconomics, recreation, wetlands, water resources, airspace, biological resources, cultural resources, air quality, and utilities and infrastructure were determined to be the resources susceptible to potential cumulative impacts. The Proposed Action was determined not to contribute to potential cumulative impacts to transportation; noise; topography, geology, and soils; and hazardous materials and waste. When considered in conjunction with the past, present, and foreseeable future projects, the

cumulative socioeconomic impacts on taxes and revenue are expected to be significant.

AGENCY COORDINATION AND CONSULTATION: The GAANG, FAA, and the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) have participated in the preparation of the EIS as cooperating agencies. The USMC has delegated the responsibility for operating and maintaining TBR to the GAANG. The FAA has authority over the existing restricted airspace, Restricted Area R-3007, which will be modified under the Proposed Action. The USACE also participated as a cooperating agency due to the presence of wetlands in the proposed acquisition areas. Because the Proposed Action is also subject to federal and state regulatory requirements, the USMC also initiated consultation with a number of federal and state agencies. Other parties such as private landowners and local organizations were also contacted on account of their potential interest in the Proposed Action.

*United States Fish and Wildlife Service - Endangered Species Act
Section 7 Consultation*

The Proposed Action encompasses the area of responsibility for the USFWS Southeast Regional Office, the Coastal Sub-Office of the Georgia Ecological Services Office (Region 4). The USMC

initiated informal consultation at a meeting on November 30, 2011. It was established that the USMC would provide follow-up field surveys for listed species potentially affected by the Proposed Action. Threatened and endangered species surveys were conducted in spring 2011 for the eastern indigo snake, frosted flatwoods salamander, wood stork, striped newt, and gopher tortoise. The USMC submitted a determination of effects on threatened and endangered species to the USFWS on August 2, 2011, to which the USFWS provided concurrence on September 22, 2011.

National Historic Preservation Act - Section 106 Consultation

In accordance with 36 CFR Part 800, the USMC consulted with the Georgia State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO), the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP), 21 federally recognized Indian tribes, and 15 other potentially interested parties. The USMC initiated National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) Section 106 consultation with the Georgia SHPO on January 19, 2011. The Georgia SHPO concurred with the Area of Potential Effect (APE) for the Proposed Action and the phased approach for compliance with Section 106 of the NHPA. The USMC and Georgia SHPO developed a Programmatic Agreement (PA) for acquisition activities included in the Proposed Action.

The Georgia SHPO signed the PA on March 6, 2012. The USMC filed the PA with the ACHP on June 12, 2012. The ACHP acknowledged receipt of the PA on June 18, 2012, thereby completing the consultation requirements of Section 106 of the NHPA and ACHP regulations. The PA was also provided to the 21 federally recognized Indian tribes for review and comment. To date, none of the contacted tribes have expressed issues or concerns regarding the Proposed Action, nor have the tribes identified traditional cultural properties or sacred sites that could be impacted by the Proposed Action. The USMC initiated Section 106 consultation on September 13, 2011 with a total of 15 other parties whom may have interests related to the Proposed Action. These parties included landowners and companies holding timber leases within the proposed acquisition areas; local government representatives (McIntosh County Manager and Long County Commissioners); and other identified parties (local historical society, environmental organizations, etc.) The USMC received one response from Molphus Woodlands Group, a landowner, whom requested that a right-of-entry agreement be obtained prior to conducting any surveys.

*Georgia Department of Natural Resources Coastal Resources
Division - Coastal Zone Management Act Compliance*

In accordance with the Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA) and 15 CFR Part 930, the USMC prepared a Coastal Consistency Determination (CCD) to determine if the Proposed Action is consistent with the Georgia Coastal Management Plan (GCMP), administered by the Coastal Resources Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GADNR). The USMC submitted the CCD to the State of Georgia Federal Consistency Coordinator on June 25, 2012, concluding that implementation of the Proposed Action would be consistent with the CZMA and the enforceable policies of the GCMP. By letter dated September 27, 2012, the State of Georgia affirmed concurrence with the USMC's consistency determination. The CCD document, included in the Final EIS, details the action alternatives and their anticipated effects on the land, water, or natural resources located in the state coastal zone.

RESPONSE TO COMMENTS ON THE FINAL EIS: DON publicly distributed the Final EIS on March 22, 2013. The USMC reviewed and considered all comments that were received during the 30-day wait period. No issues arose during this period that warranted any changes to the Final EIS. Of the total 26 comments submitted

during this period, 12 comments expressed support for, or had no concerns with, the Proposed Action. The EPA submitted a letter confirming that the agency's initial comments concerning noise and potential impacts to wetlands were adequately addressed in the Final EIS. EPA rated the Final EIS as "Lack of Objections," meaning the review has not identified any potential impacts requiring substantive changes to the preferred alternative. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Wildlife Resources Division of GADNR also stated they had no additional comments.


Approximately 14 comments expressed objections to or concerns with the Proposed Action. The majority of these comments reiterated previous concerns, primarily from individual members of the public, regarding the Proposed Action's potential socioeconomic impacts on Long and McIntosh Counties. The DON has acknowledged this potential loss of tax revenues to local governments resulting from implementation of the Proposed Action and recognizes tax loss as a significant, unavoidable adverse impact to both Long and McIntosh Counties. There are no legal mechanisms by which the DON can compensate local governments for the loss of tax revenues resulting from the conversion of privately owned lands to federal ownership. In addition to the

potential offsets mentioned in the socioeconomics section of this ROD that will provide both short and long-term benefits to the region, these losses may be indirectly mitigated through the potential development of mutual support agreements with Long and McIntosh Counties and related construction of fire and emergency response facilities that are necessary because of the TBR expansion.

Concern for Native American resources was also a topic of two comments from the public. Neither of the commenters is affiliated with a Native American tribe. The comments were provided on the Draft EIS as the commenters had not reviewed the Final EIS; responses were provided in the Final EIS and copies of the Final EIS were provided to the commenters. After receiving the comments, the USMC contacted the consulting tribes and reconfirmed that the tribes had no issues or concerns with the Proposed Action. Neither the tribes nor the SHPO has identified traditional cultural properties or sacred sites within the area of potential effect for the Proposed Action. To the greatest extent possible, the USMC will work to avoid any cultural resources that are found on any newly acquired federal property and minimize any potential impacts.

CONCLUSION: After careful consideration of the purpose and need for the Proposed Action, the analysis and conclusions presented in the Final EIS, and comments received from federal, state, and local agencies, non-governmental organizations, tribal nations, and members of the public, I have decided to proceed with the expansion and modernization of TBR through the implementation of Alternative 4 (the Preferred Alternative) as described in the Final EIS. This selected alternative expands TBR by acquiring 28,630 acres (Acquisition Areas 1B and 3); terminates the 3,007-acre timber easement held by McIntosh County on the existing range; seeks modification of existing restricted airspace; and constructs range infrastructure.

1/17/14
Date



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Navy (Energy, Installations and Environment)