

DRAFT
FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
AND FINDING OF NO PRACTICABLE ALTERNATIVE

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
MILITARY TRAINING EXERCISES WITHIN THE CIBOLA NATIONAL
FOREST NEAR KIRTLAND AIR FORCE BASE, NEW MEXICO

AGENCY: 377th Air Base Wing (377 ABW), Kirtland Air Force Base (AFB), New Mexico

BACKGROUND: Military training of the 351st Special Warfare Training Squadron (351 SW TS), (Pararescuemen/Combat Rescue Officer [PJ/CRO]); 58th Special Operations Wing (58 SOW); and 4th Reconnaissance Battalion (4th Recon), United States Marine Corps has occurred on the Cibola National Forest (NF) since the 1970s under various special use permits. Helicopter and fixed-wing training, tactical ground operations, and parachute training in the Cibola NF is ideal because of the diverse terrain and landscape found in the forest. Pursuant to National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), 32 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 989 (*Air Force Environmental Impact Analysis Process*) (EIAP), and other applicable regulations, Kirtland AFB completed an environmental assessment (EA) of the potential environmental consequences of continuing military training in the Cibola NF, with a small increase in training frequency and number of personnel in the field, as well as increased numbers of permitted training sites. The attached EA, which is incorporated by reference and supports this Finding of No Significant Impact, evaluated the No-action Alternative, Alternative 1, and the Proposed Action.

PROPOSED ACTION: The Air Force proposes to continue military training exercises in four Ranger Districts (RD) within the Cibola NF - Magdalena RD, Sandia RD, Mountainair RD, and Mt. Taylor RD. PJ/CRO training will include land navigation training, mountain rescue training, tactics training, field training exercises (FTX), and medical exercises with components of training occurring at various sites within the Magdalena, Sandia, and Mt. Taylor RDs. PJ/CRO training classes will increase from four to five a year and from 29 to 35 students per class. Training durations for the various components will range from one to seven days. A new land navigation training course would be established in the Magdalena RD to facilitate more reliable scheduling of winter training that is sometimes made difficult by impassable conditions near Grants Corner on the Mt. Taylor RD or fire restrictions. The 58 SOW activities will include training for helicopter and fixed-wing aircrew in high-altitude operations, as well as for specialized C130 airdrop training. This training will occur at existing helicopter landing zones (HLZs) and Drop Zones (DZs), as well as at new HLZs X, Y, and Z. The 58 SOW will also conduct Opposing Force operations within the Cibola NF. Student load and frequency/intensity of 58 SOW training will not change from current conditions. 58 SOW training will occur at various sites within the Magdalena, Mountainair, and Mt. Taylor RDs. The 4th Recon will utilize the Cibola NF at the currently used level of no more than three days per event, two to three times per year for reconnaissance training, tactical exercises, airborne training, and other activities, with a class size of approximately 30-40 personnel. 4th Recon training will occur at Grants Corner and Ojo Redondo or Post Office Flats within the Mt. Taylor RD (Zuni Mountains Unit).

ALTERNATIVE 1: Under Alternative 1, the 351 SW TS (PJ/CRO) and 58 SOW and associated units would continue their current training programs within the Cibola NF on the currently permitted sites. This alternative would still require renewal of a special use permit, allowing the continuation of the current level of training.

NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE: Under the No action Alternative, no permits would be issued by the Forest Service for military training activities, and the 351 SW TS (PJ/CRO), 58 SOW, 4th Recon and associated units would not conduct military training activities within the Cibola NF.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION:

Airspace Use and Management. There will be no airspace impacts because 58 SOW activities will be consistent with baseline airspace management procedures. 58 SOW aircraft will continue to not: (1) overfly cities, towns, and groups of people at an altitude of less than 1,000 feet above the highest obstacle within 2,000 feet of the aircraft; (2) overfly non-congested areas at less than 500 feet above ground level (except when operating at and around an HLZ in accordance with prescribed directives); (3) overfly USFS wilderness and primitive areas below 2,000 feet above ground level; (4) conduct intentional low-level overflight of livestock, wildlife, dwellings, or populated areas; or, (5) overfly areas identified by tribal agencies as noise sensitive or overflight sensitive areas.

Noise. Land area that would exceed a Day-Night Average Sound Level (DNL) of 55 “A-weighted” decibels (dBA), would be rural/wilderness, with people in the areas on rare occasions. No noise-sensitive land use activities will be exposed to noise of DNL 55 dBA and greater. As many as 22 percent of the persons recreating near the tactics training and the FTX area could be highly annoyed due to exposure to DNL 65 dBA and greater, the threshold for comparing and assessing community noise effects. However, the potential for annoyance at this level is low because the area exposed to noise at and above DNL 65 dBA is small (i.e. 91 acres) when compared to the nearly 800,000 acres located within the Magdalena RD. Noise from Proposed Action training at HLZs 26, X, Y, and Z and Cunningham and Grants Corner DZs will not exceed DNL 65 dBA or greater. Listeners in normal communication in a steady background noise of 56 decibels (dB) that increases to 66 dB due to aircraft noise and are at a distance of ten feet from each other will have to move to about three feet apart to maintain the same intelligibility or raise their voices. Their speech intelligibility will decrease considerably if they remain at ten feet of separation. These conditions will last only as long as noise from the overflying aircraft remains at 66 dB or greater. Non-auditory health effects and noise-induced hearing damage will not occur.

Air Quality. There will be short-term emissions during aircraft flight operations and vehicle transport as well as a minimal increase in long-term emissions from the increase in annual training classes. All emissions will fall below the 10 percent level that would be considered regionally significant by the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

Earth Resources. There will be minimal soil disturbance in areas where routine and repeated use of the ground surface occurs and negligible soil disturbance in areas where foot traffic would occur more randomly.

There will be long-term or permanent loss of vegetation and erosion of loose fine-grained soil materials resulting in bare rock surface with little or no vegetation at HLZs X, Y and Z as a result of helicopter activities. This will be similar to the existing conditions at HLZs 10 and 26.

Biological Resources. No additional vegetation will be lost at HLZ 10 from the proposed action. Although there will be some habitat disruption of Management Indicator Species (MIS) habitat from aircraft noise, there will be no decrease of habitat or stability in the Mountainair RD. There will be no effect on the population trends of any species. The Proposed Action may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect the federally listed Mexican spotted owl (MSO) or its critical habitat within the Mountainair RD. For the MSO in the Mt. Taylor RD, six MSO Protected Activity Centers may be impacted by training operations. However, it is determined that the Proposed Action may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect the MSO or its habitat, or MSO Critical Habitat within the Mt. Taylor RD. The Proposed Action may also impact four USFS Region 3 (FS R3) species, but is not likely to result in a trend toward federal listing or loss of viability. There will be a low potential impact on the Rocky mountain bighorn sheep in the Manzano Mountains and the Desert bighorn sheep in the Sierra Ladrones Mountains. There will be moderate impact on vegetation in the tactics, FTX, and land navigation areas in Magdalena RD and Mt. Taylor RD due to random movement of foot traffic. There will be potential long-term or permanent effects to vegetation and/or habitat (including MIS habitat) at HLZs X, Y, and Z. There will be a decrease of approximately 0.03 percent in Mountain desert grassland habitat when compared to that available in the Cibola NF. The habitat locally and forest- wide will remain stable. There will also be some disruption of MIS habitat due to noise and visual stimuli; however, a low potential exists for affecting population trends of MIS. There will be no impacts to the Golden eagle, Bald eagle, or federally listed Zuni fleabane or their critical habitats. Individuals of up to seven FS R3 species may be impacted in the Magdalena RD, but there is no expected trend toward federal listing or loss of viability. In the Mt. Taylor and Sandia RDs there will be no long-term or permanent effects to vegetation and/or habitat and no decrease of MIS species habitat due to training activity. There will be some disruption of habitat due to aircraft noise, truck noise, and random foot traffic of students, but a low potential exists to impact the population trends for the species. Individuals of up to six FS R3 species in the Mt. Taylor RD (Zuni Mountains Unit) and up to four FS R3 species in the Sandia RD may be impacted, but there is no expected trend toward federal listing or loss of viability. There will be no adverse impact on domestic livestock in the Magdalena or Mt Taylor RDs. The LMRP showed no delineated wetlands in the project training areas. Riparian habitat occurred near the training sites in Magdalena, Mt. Taylor, and Sandia RDs.

Cultural Resources. There will be a low potential for impacts to historic properties.

Water Resources. There will be no impacts to groundwater or floodplains, and negligible impact to surface water as a result of erosion.

Hazardous Materials and Wastes. There will be no impact to hazardous materials, wastes, or environmental restoration program sites.

Ground and Aircraft Safety. There will be a negligible increase in potential for ground accidents including slips, trips, falls, traffic accidents, and reptile and insect bites; a negligible increase in likelihood of encountering wildfires; and a negligible increase in the potential for students to experience heat stress, stroke, hypothermia, and frostbite. There will be no change in aircraft mishap rates.

Bird-Aircraft Strike Hazard. There will be no change in the number of bird-aircraft strikes and distribution of strikes by bird species.

Utilities and Infrastructure. No public recreation facilities or utilities would be used for training exercises; therefore, there will be no impacts to utility usage and infrastructure during training activities at Cibola NF. Foot traffic, vehicular traffic, and establishment of base camps and staging areas will not impact drainage patterns within the training areas. Rotor wash effects at HLZs X, Y, and Z will result in eventual concentrated stormwater runoff off of bare rock. There will be a minor, long-term increase in traffic counts on roads from Kirtland AFB to training sites, as well as within the Cibola NF.

Land Use, Recreation, and Visual Resources. There will be a minimal loss of land use and/or facilities on a permanent or temporary basis. There will be no adverse temporary disruption to physical facilities or incompatibilities with existing land use management plans. There will be no elimination of recreational facilities and/or resources, substantial deterioration in quality of facilities/resources and associated decrease in visitor usage, or disruption of recreational activities. No substantial adverse effects on scenic vistas, substantial damage to scenic resources, or substantial degradation of the existing visual character and quality of site and surrounding area will be expected.

Socioeconomic Resources. There will be no change to population, housing, or economy as a result of the Proposed Action.

Environmental Justice. While low-income and minority populations exist in the communities surrounding the military training, none of the alternatives are expected to have disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects. Therefore, there will be no disproportionate and adverse impacts to environmental justice communities.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR ALTERNATIVE 1: The conditions and characteristics anticipated under Alternative 1 for Airspace Use and Management, Earth Resources, Ground and Aircraft Safety, Bird and Aircraft Strike Hazard, Infrastructure and Utilities, and Socioeconomic Resources would continue at levels equal to those occurring under the existing, baseline conditions. Impacts for Cultural Resources; Water Resources; Hazardous Materials and Wastes; Land Use, Recreation, and Visual Resources; and Environmental Justice would be the same as those described under the Proposed Action. Noise impacts would be limited to HLZs 10 and 26, Cunningham DZ, tactics training area, FTX area, and Grants Corner DZ, and any affected nearby residents would experience noise below the level “...requisite to protect the public health and welfare with an adequate margin of safety”. Total land exposed to overflights would be approximately five percent of the total land in the three RDs and the Sierra Ladrones Wilderness Study Area.

Total annual air emissions would be slightly less than those described for the Proposed Action, although emission sources will be the same. Impacts to Biological Resources would be the same as the Proposed Action except that in the Magdalena RD, there would be no change from baseline conditions for the areas planned (under the Proposed Action) for HLZs X, Y, and Z.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR NO-ACTION ALTERNATIVE: Under the No-action Alternative, Kirtland AFB units would conduct no military training activities within the Cibola NF, and no permits would be issued by the USFS for military training activities. Noise would continue to be generated by non-military vehicles and OHVs operating on the National Forest System Roads (NFSR) and motorized trails within the Cibola NF; however, it would be temporary and would occur only when vehicles and OHVs are being operated. Aircraft operating on VR-176 would continue to generate noise during overflight, but it would not exceed DNL 55 dBA. Air emissions would be slightly reduced due to the elimination of military aircraft and vehicle usage within the Cibola NF. No disturbance to the Cibola NF land would occur under the No-action Alternative. Sandia RD would have little change to MIS conditions; and potential impacts to MIS in Mt. Taylor RD would cease. There would be no potential impact on the MSO in Mountainair and Mt. Taylor RDs and no potential impact on the Desert bighorn sheep located in the Sierra Ladrones Mountains. Potential disturbances initiated under existing training conditions at Mt. Taylor RD would be eliminated, further benefiting the species recovery in the area. There would be no potential change to the status of the Zuni fleabane. A slight improvement or benefit to Threatened, Endangered, and Forest Service Sensitive Species habitats may occur in the Sandia RD under the No-action Alternative. Under the No-action Alternative, there would be no impact to surface water, groundwater, or floodplains within the project area, and any potential for the use of Hazardous Materials or generation of Hazardous Waste as a result of vehicle repair would cease. There would be a minor decrease in the number of safety incidents resulting from slips, trips, falls, traffic accidents, reptiles and insects. The elimination of 58 SOW flying within the Cibola NF would eliminate the potential for bird-aircraft strikes. There would be no change to cultural resources or utility usage and infrastructure as a result of the No-action Alternative.

SUMMARY OF CUMULATIVE EFFECTS: Potential cumulative effects would include a slight potential for cumulative noise impacts on the MSO and other MIS and Forest Service Species from flight activity. Also, there would be a minimal potential for cumulative aircraft safety and airspace use and management impacts between HLZ 10 and Cannon Low Altitude Tactical Navigation Area operations; however, these would be managed through procedures to deconflict aircraft on a military training route and aircraft in the airspace surrounding the military training route. The potential for cumulative noise impacts resulting from 58 SOW and 127 SOW operations at and around HLZ 10 would be low. Project cumulative effects across RDs are low due to the diversity of habitats as well as the large size of habitats compared to the area directly and indirectly affected by training activities. From navigation training there would also be a moderate cumulative impact on vegetation, MIS species and Forest Service sensitive species since this training is similar to recreational uses such as camping and hiking. There would be a slight potential cumulative impact in the Sandia RD from training activities on MIS species and Forest Service sensitive species. The potential for an increase in bird-aircraft strikes resulting from 58 SOW and 127 SOW operations at and around HLZ 10 would be low.

SUMMARY OF MITIGATION MEASURES: Military training activities under the Proposed Action will comply with State and Federal regulations. Mitigation measures will include avoidance of training associated with flight operations and opposing force during the period of March 1 through August 31 to avoid the MSO nesting season; maintaining flight operations at a minimum of 2,000 feet above the Sierra Ladrones Wilderness Study Area and the Manzano Wilderness Areas as to avoid impacts to the Desert bighorn sheep, and Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, respectively; and avoidance of flying within one mile horizontally and 1,000 feet vertically of known Golden eagle nesting sites from late February to the end of August. Best Management Practices (BMPs) recommended to minimize hearing loss during munitions training include wearing hearing protection in accordance with Air Force directives. BMPs to reduce impacts to local air quality include using low-sulfur and bio-diesel fuel in transport vehicles. BMPs such as the implementation of site-specific wind-blown erosion control plans, which could include the use of vegetative stabilization, berms, or other barriers to temporarily detain runoff, could help prevent soil loss due to rotor wash. To minimize impacts to cultural resources, personnel would avoid the Harding Cabin, which would be “off-limits” to all training personnel. Historic property awareness training would be provided to encourage recognition and avoidance of archaeological properties. If groundwater is encountered during activities, BMPs, including vegetative stabilization, berms, or other barriers to temporarily detain runoff, would be implemented to protect groundwater resources and water quality. In terms of safety, BMPs include student briefings on the dangers of training in a national forest. For instance, students would be taught fire safety, how to reduce the chance for animal bites and stings, how to identify dangerous reptiles and insects, and how to properly treat a bite or sting. Additionally, local District Ranger notification of training activities, along with informing civilians of current training activities, wearing blaze orange vests and hats, and briefing students on civilian interaction procedures would serve as BMPs when encountering armed hunters and other recreational users of the Cibola NF. Students would also be instructed on how to operate military vehicles during training exercises within the Cibola NF. This would include ensuring that vehicles stay on NFSR, training on what to do when encountering another vehicle on a narrow road, and how to safely evacuate a rolled vehicle.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC REVIEW AND INTERAGENCY COORDINATION: Public comments will be inserted after completion of the public comment period.

FINDING OF NO PRACTICABLE ALTERNATIVE: Pursuant to Executive Order 11988, and considering all supporting information, I find that there is no practicable alternative to military training within floodplains located within the Mt. Taylor RD (Zuni Mountains Unit), Sandia RD, and Magdalena RD, as described in the Proposed Action and Alternative 1 in the attached EA.

No mapped floodplains are located within the Mountainair RD. Training activities would not be anticipated to affect the floodplain elevation or impede floodplain flow, as no permanent structures would be constructed within the project areas. While training activities would be limited to occasional, light foot- and vehicular-traffic within the training areas, floodplains and surface waterways would only be utilized for light foot traffic. Motorized or vehicular traffic would not be permitted with floodplains or surface

waterways. Therefore, the Proposed Action and Alternative 1 would have no permanent impacts to the floodplains.

CYNTHIA OLIVA, GS-15, USAF
Division Chief, AETC/ A4P

Date

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT: Based upon my review of the EA, I conclude that the Proposed Action will not have a significant direct, indirect, or cumulative impact upon the environment. Accordingly, the requirements of the NEPA, regulations promulgated by the President’s Council on Environmental Quality, and 32 CFR Part 989 are fulfilled and an Environmental Impact Statement is not required at this time.

CYNTHIA OLIVA, GS-15, USAF
Division Chief, AETC/ A4P

Date