

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT FOR IMPROVEMENTS TO MILITARY TRAINING ROUTES IN ALASKA

Description of Proposed Action

The U.S. Air Force (USAF) proposes to modify the existing network of twelve Military Training Routes (MTRs) throughout Southwestern and Interior Alaska. Under the proposed action, the ground tracks for eight of the existing MTRs would be modified, two would be removed from service, and two would remain unchanged. The USAF also proposes to establish two new routes. All of the existing routes would have a reduction in flight operations; operations on new routes would average about 1 sortie per week. In total for twelve MTRs, there would be an average of up to 8 routine operation sorties per day. Major flying exercises, which typically occur for two-week periods up to six times per year, would normally use Alaska Military Operations Areas (MOAs), although they could use MTRs occasionally if no MOA airspace is available. All routes would be capable of flight operations at up to sonic speeds, low altitude (as low as 100 feet above ground level [AGL]), daylight or darkness, and in all weather conditions. Most routes would be 10 nautical miles wide, would be capable of flight under both visual and instrument conditions, and would support flight in either direction. The ceiling on these MTRs would vary from 1,500 feet AGL to 17,000 feet above mean sea level.

The proposed changes are intended to address a number of inefficiencies identified through experience with the existing MTRs over the past 10+ years, including inadequate connectivity to ranges, radio dead spots, routes longer than necessary, areas of frequently poor weather, extensive localized mitigation requirements, and limitations on joint training exercises with the Navy. The net effect is inefficient training and administration. To address this need, the proposed routes would provide weather alternatives, move or remove from service routes that are rarely used but in high civilian air traffic areas, establish connectivity to the coastline for Naval training, move away from areas requiring extensive local mitigation, and generally provide improved training efficiency through better radio coverage and shorter routes.

Description of Alternatives

Alternatives to the proposed action include the No Action Alternative (NAA) and implementing only a portion of the proposal. The NAA would leave the existing MTR network as is. The existing network is assessed for up to 42 routine operation sorties per day and an additional 5,040 special training sorties per year. Alternatively, the USAF could implement some, but not all, of the proposed action.

The Air Force has chosen to implement only a portion of the proposed action. The Air Force has chosen to not establish the proposed two new routes, studied as MTR 960 and MTR 970.

Summary of Environmental Impacts

The following summarizes the anticipated impact to specific environmental resources:

Civilian Airspace – One identified need for the proposed action is to reduce military training in areas of high civilian airspace activity by moving MTRs to lower traffic areas. Additionally, the USAF proposes to

reduce the number of potential flights on almost all MTRs. For new routes and segments, flight operations would average 1 sortie per week or less resulting in a low impact on civilian airspace use.

Parks, Refuges, and Recreation – In several instances the USAF has moved MTRs further away from designated conservation units, such as Lake Clark National Park, the Nowitna National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), the Delta Wild and Scenic River, and Wood-Tikchik State Park. In some instances MTRs would be closer or over conservation units including the Yukon Flats NWR (MTR 970), Minto Flats State Game Refuge (MTR 960), Talachulitna Recreation River (MTR 1905), Katmai National Park and Preserve (MTR 931), and the McNeil River State Game Refuge (MTR 931). In each of these cases the MTR ground track has been carefully selected to minimize impacts while still meeting USAF training objectives. Land managers and tribal organizations in each of these areas have been consulted and their comments have been considered in establishing the route locations. Consultations have lead to flight reductions to an average of one per week except for MTR 1905 where flights would average four per week – still an insignificant impact.

Wildlife – Major wildlife species occurring in the vicinity of MTRs include caribou, moose, bear, Dall sheep, bison, waterfowl, raptors, marine birds, and marine mammals. The proposed route changes will generally result in similar impacts to the NAA. The USAF will continue to implement mitigation measures from the NAA and 1995 Military Operations Areas EIS to protect wildlife during sensitive times of the year such as caribou calving periods. One new impact is to marine birds and mammals where MTRs 931 and 1902 have been extended to the coast. To minimize any potential impacts, proposed flight operations on these routes has been reduced to an average of one per week.

Subsistence Uses – Both the proposed action and NAA have been designed to minimize impacts on villages and important subsistence hunting areas. In two instances – MTRs 935 and 937 – impacts on villages are reduced by moving routes further away. Otherwise subsistence impacts from resources crossed are similar under the proposal and NAA. The reduction in flight operations should reduce total impacts on subsistence.

Conclusion

Following a review of the attached Environmental Assessment, I have concluded that the proposed improvements to military training routes in Alaska will not have a significant impact on the environment. An Environmental Impact Statement is not required for this proposal.

General, USAF
Chairperson, HQ PACAF Environmental
Protection Committee

Date