

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

**MCAS CHERRY POINT RANGE OPERATIONS**

**CRAVEN, CARTERET, AND PAMLICO COUNTIES, NORTH CAROLINA**

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**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT FOR  
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS RANGE OPERATIONS  
AT MCAS CHERRY POINT, NORTH CAROLINA**

Pursuant to the Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 Code of Federal Regulations Parts 1500–1508) implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) (42 United States Code Section 4321 et seq.), United States (US) Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Cherry Point gives notice that an Environmental Assessment (EA) has been prepared to address United States Marine Corps (USMC) , US Navy, and other armed forces operations at MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina. Based on the analysis of the EA, MCAS Cherry Point finds that the proposed action will not have a significant impact on the human environment.

MCAS Cherry Point is the Marine Corps' largest air station and supports Marine Corps, Navy, and other joint force tactical training by maintaining and operating the MCAS Cherry Point Range Complex. The MCAS Cherry Point Range Complex is a unique training environment comprised of airspace, land, and water training areas. This particular range complex is of vital importance to the readiness of Marine Corps Forces.

The purpose for the proposed action is for the Marine Corps to meet its statutory responsibility to organize, train, equip, and maintain combat-ready Marine Forces at MCAS Cherry Point. The need for the proposed action is to increase the operational training tempo at the MCAS Cherry Point Range Complex in order to meet pre-deployment training schedules associated with emerging missions. The quality of training is also affected by shortfalls in existing training ranges within the complex.

Under the proposed action MCAS Cherry Point would provide a training environment within the MCAS Cherry Point Range Complex with the capacity and capability to fully support required training tasks for operational units, military schools, and other users. The proposed action would accommodate future increases in the operational training tempo at the MCAS Cherry Point Range Complex; support existing warfare missions at the range complex; and maintain the long-term viability of the MCAS Cherry Point Range Complex while protecting the environment. The proposed action would require increases in training operations at existing ranges with the addition of an intermittently used, new water restricted area around BT-11, Piney Island. These training operations would be conducted within special use airspace and on land and water ranges within the range complex.

The EA addresses two proposed action alternatives, one which is the preferred alternative, and the No Action Alternative. The rationale for several other alternatives that were considered but dismissed is also provided. The No Action Alternative includes current training operations at the MCAS Cherry Point Range Complex plus training operations associated with four actions evaluated and approved in previous NEPA documents, but not yet fully implemented at the

installation. The No Action Alternative does not support the known operational needs of the Marine Corps because existing training ranges, as currently configured and operated, cannot accommodate required military training. The No Action Alternative may affect several species of threatened or endangered wildlife. Two alternatives (Alternative 1 and Alternative 2) and the No Action Alternative were carried forward for detailed analysis in the EA. The three alternatives include common elements with regard to continuation of existing operations at MCAS Cherry Point. Alternative 1 would provide the current level of training operations within the MCAS Cherry Point Range Complex that occur under the No Action Alternative with additional training increases in sortie-operations and munitions usage associated with rotary-wing aircraft squadrons and a 10–20 percent increase in small arms range activities. Alternative 2 would provide the Alternative 1 level of training operations, plus establish a water restricted area for intermittent use in support of a proposed change in small arms live-fire training. Alternative 2 is the preferred alternative.

The EA demonstrates that implementation of Alternative 2, which will henceforth be referred to as the proposed action, would have some environmental impacts, but none are considered to be significant.

The proposed action will not require changes to land use within MCAS Cherry Point. No construction of new facilities is necessary; therefore, no planning or zoning ordinances will be affected. Additionally, regional land use will not change because no additional land will be required for the proposed action. No impacts to land use as a result of the proposed action will occur.

The proposed action is consistent to the greatest extent possible with the relevant enforceable policies of the North Carolina Coastal Area Management Act. MCAS Cherry Point will submit a letter of Negative Determination to the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Division of Coastal Management.

The increase in training operations associated with the proposed action will not cause disproportionately adverse environmental, economic, or health impacts to minority populations, low-income populations, or children on or nearby MCAS Cherry Point.

Under the proposed action, increased sorties and munitions expenditures associated with rotary-wing aircraft squadrons will take place in water restricted areas that are currently within a prohibited or restricted area of Pamlico Sound. Entry into these areas is not authorized; therefore, increased training activities in prohibited or restricted areas will not adversely affect the local fisheries-based economy. In the proposed action, an increase in .50 caliber weapons firing from helicopters and small boats will occur within a new, intermittent water restricted area, which currently has commercial, recreational, and state sponsored fisheries activities (oyster clutch planting sites). The intermittent use of this area (estimated to be 5 weekdays per month, for 7 hours per day between 4 p.m. and 11 p.m., during each of approximately 10 months of the year, February through November) will result in periodic commercial and recreational fishing prohibitions for a maximum duration of 50 seven-hour periods (350 hrs per calendar year),

which is less than 6 percent of the calendar year. The intermittent water restricted area occupies 0.3 percent of the region of influence defined as the waters of Pamlico Sound, Pamlico River, Pungo River, and Neuse River within the counties of Pamlico, Carteret, Craven, Beaufort, and Hyde. This will result in a minor impact to the local and regional fisheries-based economy. MCAS Cherry Point is planning to establish a phone number the public can call to find out whether the intermittent water restricted area is open or closed to further minimize the impacts. The new intermittent water restricted area must go through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers process for inclusion in the Code of Federal Regulations before these proposed actions can begin.

The proposed action will result in a minor impact on local air quality. There would be a slight increase in air emissions due to the increase in munitions usage. Increased usage of rotary-wing aircraft would also slightly increase air emissions. The combined increase in munitions expenditures and use of rotary-wing aircraft is expected to have an overall slight negative impact on air quality for the area. However, air pollution concentrations will not exceed the National Ambient Air Quality Standards.

Aircraft operations as a result of the proposed action will increase by 1 percent. This small increase will not result in considerable aircraft noise impacts. Munitions usage rates at the bombing ranges would increase by approximately 18 percent; however, these increases will have minimal noise effects on sensitive land uses.

No architectural resources included or eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places will be affected by the proposed action. Impacts to archaeological resources that may be present within the land ranges may occur under the proposed action. However, MCAS Cherry Point has identified all high probability archaeological sensitive soils located within the installation boundary. Accordingly, adverse impacts to land based archaeological resources is not anticipated due to avoidance and minimization measures established and carried out by training, range, and environmental staff. There are no known underwater archaeological resources present within the water ranges considered in this analysis and therefore, no impacts are anticipated.

The proposed action will have minor impacts to soils; however, the impacts will continue to be minimized through land management efforts and by employing applicable soil and sedimentation control techniques at the training sites.

Underwater sediments will have a slightly higher incident rate of disturbance from increased boat operations. Localized turbidity resulting from live munitions will cause short-term impacts. However, these impacts on underwater sediments would not measurably affect sediment quality.

Adverse impacts to surface water and groundwater will be negligible. A baseline assessment of operational and training ranges conducted under the Range Environmental Vulnerability Assessment (REVA) Program at MCAS Cherry Point has not identified environmental concerns regarding munitions constituents migrating off-range. Continual monitoring of the ranges under REVA will ensure that increased munitions usage under the proposed action will not have adverse impacts to water quality or pose a risk to human health and the environment.

Increased training and munitions expenditures on land ranges will have minor impacts on wetlands in the MCAS Cherry Point Range Complex. MCAS Cherry Point will employ several management approaches and protection measures that will minimize impacts to wetlands and floodplains. These measures include keeping vehicles on existing roads, prohibiting new road creation during exercises, and no authorization of extensive digging throughout the range complex.

Impacts to vegetative communities may result from limited off-road vehicle traffic during some of the training exercises. Most training operations, however, generally remain on designated roads or trails and areas that have been designated for training purposes. Munitions firing may cause minor degradation of vegetation over time. Based on the reuse of already disturbed areas for the increased training activities, no adverse impacts will occur as a result of these activities.

The proposed action would result in minor impacts to wildlife that is not expected to affect the stability of the wildlife populations on range or migratory bird populations within the region. Wildlife mortality associated with vehicle collisions during vehicle training exercises is rare. Bird species could experience temporary, minor impacts during rotary-/fixed wing training exercises. The proposed increases in bombing target range usage could result in an increase in bird/wildlife aircraft strike potential; however, based on historical data, the potential incidents will likely remain low. The relatively low number of actual and predicted bird/wildlife aircraft strikes within the MCAS Cherry Point airspace indicates the aircraft strike avoidance procedures have proved successful in the past and will continue to be utilized.

Federally listed threatened and endangered terrestrial species (seabeach amaranth, red-cockaded woodpecker, and roseate tern) have not been identified on the land ranges. Additionally, due to the limited nature of potential disturbance from munitions usage at the main station, there will be no effect on sensitive species. Proposed activities will not have an adverse impact to federally listed terrestrial species.

Training activities conducted in water ranges may negatively impact marine or estuarine organisms or habitat. There would be the potential for more frequent disturbances to marine birds by noise. Increased use of munitions may increase the potential for ordnance striking a bird; however, existing precautionary measures are in place and will continue to be utilized. Direct, but short-term impacts to marine invertebrates at the seafloor will occur due to the use of ordnance for training operations. Fish residing in the MCAS Cherry Point water ranges may experience temporary, short-term impacts from training activities. If disturbed by noise, fish will likely leave the area and return when the activities have ceased. Noise from non-explosive ordnance will not pose a risk to marine life; noise levels above water are at levels that would not harm animals, and moderate-level noise below water is quickly absorbed. Additionally, underwater noise levels from aircraft flyovers are substantially below levels considered as harassment to marine mammals.

The proposed action will have minor impacts on marine mammals. The probability of a direct hit to a marine mammal is extremely low based upon calculations which incorporate the surface area

of a dolphin and the density of dolphins at the bombing targets. The annual estimates of dolphins potentially impacted by a direct strike were calculated at 0.223 animals at BT-9 and 0.025 animals at BT-11. Increases in vessel traffic, live-fire, and explosive and non-explosive training in water-based areas surrounding BT-9 and BT-11 have a low likelihood of harming bottlenose dolphins, which occur in the region of influence. Models suggest that the proposed action may result in <1 dolphin mortality from extensive lung hemorrhage (Level A mortality), <1 dolphin could suffer from slight but recoverable lung injury (Level A injury), and approximately 13 dolphins could encounter behavioral disruption due to Temporary Threshold Shift (TTS-Level B harassment). Debris associated with training exercises, such as parachutes or strands of chaff material, could potentially be ingested; however, this is unlikely due to a dolphin's typical diet of fish and other quickly moving prey items, which are not easily mistaken for training related debris.

The proposed action may affect federally listed threatened and endangered marine species. As referenced in NOAA Fisheries' consultation number F/SER/2002/00130, there have been no reports of the shortnose sturgeon in the Pamlico Sound. Therefore, the likelihood of the presence of the shortnose sturgeon in waters adjacent to MCAS Cherry Point water ranges is extremely minimal. However, if present in the water ranges during training activities, shortnose sturgeon would likely leave the area temporarily due to noise. Harm due to live-fire is unlikely. Sightings of the West Indian manatee in or near the region of influence are not common and manatees are not known to occur in the water prohibited or restricted areas. Similar protocol for avoiding harm to dolphins is used for all marine mammals that might enter the water ranges. Four species of federally listed sea turtles (loggerhead, Kemp's ridley, green, and leatherback) are expected to occur within the region of influence, but none is known to nest within the vicinity of MCAS Cherry Point. Similar to the other marine species, increased vessel traffic and ordnance usage could result in impacts due to increased noise. Under water modeling suggest that the proposed action may result in <1 Level A mortality, <1 Level A injury, and approximately 4 turtles could encounter behavioral disruption (TTS). Debris from ordnance could be ingested or turtles could become entangled in the debris.

Personnel will avoid a release of contaminants during training operations at MCAS Cherry Point due to procedures that are in place governing the handling of hazardous materials. Live-fire small arms ranges would retain their berms to stop projectiles fired at the ranges. Mitigation measures are in place to ensure that berms are well maintained and re-graded as needed. Increases in amounts of hazardous waste generated from training activities under the proposed action are anticipated; however, increases are well within the existing capacities of hazardous waste transporters and treatment and disposal facilities at MCAS Cherry Point.

Laser usage would increase proportionally with the increase in training exercises. There is the potential for this increase to result in public mishaps; however, existing precautions to maintain public safety will be utilized under the proposed action. The public is notified of hazardous activities through the use of Notice to Airmen and Notice to Mariners. Prior public notification of Marine Corps training activities, use of known training areas, avoidance of non-military

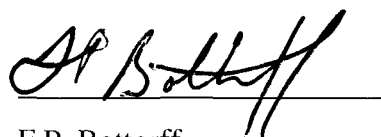
aircraft and civilians, and the remoteness of the training areas from coastal population centers reduces the potential for the interaction between the public and military aircraft. To date, these strategies have been successful in maintaining public safety and are anticipated to continue to do so; therefore, there would be no adverse impact to the public's safety.

There are no identified mitigation measures for the proposed action alternative beyond the current standard operating procedures, Best Management Practices, or actions already planned for in the Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan or other Air Station Orders and programs.

Based on the information gathered during preparation of this EA, the USMC finds that implementing the proposed action will not significantly impact the quality of the natural or human environment. According to the requirements of NEPA and the Council on Environmental Quality regulations implementing the procedural provisions of NEPA, an EIS is not necessary and will not be prepared. The EA addressing this action may be obtained from Richard Weaver, Natural Resources Specialist, Environmental Affairs Department, Natural Resources Division, Marine Corps Air Station, Building 4223, Access Rd., PSC 8003, Cherry Point, NC 28533. You may contact Mr. Weaver by phone at (252) 466-5917 or via email at richard.weaver@usmc.mil.

11 Feb 2009

Date



F.P. Bottorff

Colonel, U.S. Marine Corps

Commanding Officer

Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point