

Air Force terminates Low Altitude Training Area Environmental Analysis, prepares for more comprehensive assessment

CANNON AIR FORCE BASE, N.M.--Air Force Special Operations Command leadership concluded that a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) could not be reached through the current Environmental Assessment (EA) of the 27th Special Operations Wing's Low Altitude Training Area proposal currently under review.

Leadership anticipated that the No Action Alternative presented in the LATA proposal would not meet the wing's training requirements. Subsequently, the current EA action will be terminated and the Air Force will conduct a deeper analysis on a broader scope of wing training requirements.

"After careful evaluation, it became clear that a Finding of No Significant Impact could not be reached for this EA and still accomplish all of the training critical for our special operations forces," said Brig. Gen. Michael Kingsley, AFSOC vice commander.

The decision to terminate the current EA was influenced by the limited scope of the proposal; the valuable comments received from the public, agencies and other interested parties; and the existing need to supplement portions of the Beddown Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) at Cannon AFB, said Kingsley.

The wing, however, continues to have a requirement to train aircrews in low altitude flying. Currently this is being accomplished through the use of established Military Training Routes, Special Use Airspace, Visual Flight Rules, and excess capacity from other bases. All of these methods adhere to FAA regulations and Air Force Instructions. However, they provide less than optimal training and will not be sufficient as Cannon continues to receive its full complement of aircraft, expected to be complete in 2017.

"We still need to conduct flying training missions," said Col. Buck Elton, 27 SOW commander. "The wing operates nine different types of aircraft, each with unique training requirements. We are now conducting a complete review of all of our training needs, including, but not limited to, low altitude flying."

The requirement to assess the impact of low-altitude training, which drove the LATA EA, now overlaps with the Air Force's responsibility to assess additional training needs that were not fully known or entirely addressed during the initial Cannon Beddown EIS and Record of Decision in 2007, including requirements learned from recent operations. Fiscal realities and Air Force guidance indicate a transition to a more comprehensive analysis of the alternatives available to meet Cannon's training requirements would be wise.

Currently, the 27th Special Operations Wing is refining its flying training requirements. When these requirements are fully defined, the Air Force will follow the implementing regulations prescribed by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to determine the appropriate action.

"The NEPA process helps us make well-informed environmental decisions. We intend to fully define our training requirements, and then take the most appropriate action to meet those requirements," said Elton.

These fully defined training requirements may require more detailed environmental impact analysis and may lead to preparation of an EIS. The Air Force expects to make this determination in early 2013.

“We will find the best way to achieve our critical training objectives while remaining good neighbors to the people of Colorado and New Mexico and good stewards of our environment,” said Kingsley.

Please visit <http://www.cannon.af.mil/library/environment.asp> for the most up-to-date information regarding environmental actions at Cannon.