

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT  
FOR THE  
ESTABLISHMENT OF MILITARY TRAINING ROUTE – INSTRUMENT ROUTE (IR)  
FOR  
EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE**

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Pursuant to the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Title 42 United States (U.S.) Code Section 4321; Title 40 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Sections 1500–1508; and the Department of the Air Force (DAF) Environmental Impact Analysis Process, 32 CFR Section 989, the DAF, as the lead agency, has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) analyzing the impacts associated with establishing a Military Training Route (MTR) – Instrument Route (IR) for Eglin Air Force Base (AFB) to test new weapons systems.

**Purpose and Need (Environmental Assessment [EA] Section (§) 1.3, pages 1-2 to 1-5):** The purpose of the Proposed Action is for the 96th Test Wing (96 TW) at Eglin AFB to test new weapon systems and their components in an all-weather, long-range, low-altitude setting with a water-to-land transition that terminates in a land range underlying restricted airspace. The Proposed Action is needed because new or fifth-generation weapons systems require testing at low altitudes, with the ability to terminate in a land impact area such as one of the Eglin land test ranges.

**DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES**

**Proposed Action and Alternative 1 (EA §§2.2 and 2.3, pages 2-1 to 2-4):** The Proposed Action will consist of testing new weapon systems and their components in an all-weather, long-range, low-altitude setting with water-to-land transition that ends in a land range. The 96 TW will request a new low-altitude IR to be named IR-090 in the southeast United States from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to meet the Proposed Action requirements. The proposed route was initially named IR-096. Since the release of the Draft EA and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), the FAA and the DAF became aware of a conflict in naming designation of the proposed route IR-096. A new naming designation of the proposed IR-096 MTR had to be issued to deconflict with the naming designation of another active route known as VR-096. VR-096 is not a component of, or in any way related to this Proposed Action and the proposed IR-096. The MTR designated IR-096 naming designation was changed to IR-090 to be in accordance with proper FAA route naming procedures and to avoid confusion with the similarly named VR-096.

The Proposed Action consists of four aircraft and a cruise missile or other weapon system with no warhead, either in flight or as captive carry in a single test. In a captive carry arrangement, the weapon system does not separate from the carrier aircraft. For tests where the weapon system is in flight, one to two of the aircraft would serve as chase aircraft, following the weapon. All aircraft would fly within the elevations described in the route. Captive carry and chase aircraft would consist of either F-16D, F-15E, or F-35. A Gulf Stream may sometimes be used as a trailing aircraft. The maximum number of aircraft flights or operations per year along the route would be 48 (flying 12 events a year with a maximum of 4 aircraft per event). Prior to scheduling through the Center Scheduling Enterprise (CSE) in accordance with the Letter of Agreement, the Scheduling Agency would issue a Notice to Airmen (NOTAM), alerting the public of the use of the route. The point of origin would be over water on the boundary of Warning Area W-470. From W-470, the proposed route would flow north for 22 nautical miles, continuing to flow west/northwest into the DAF-restricted airspace block, R-2914A. The floor of the proposed route would be 500 feet above ground level for the entirety of the route, and the ceiling would be 5,000 feet mean sea level (MSL) for five segments of the route and 4,000 feet MSL for the last segment of the route. Aircraft would climb to 1,500 feet or 2,000 feet MSL to avoid noise-sensitive locations as identified in the Environmental Assessment.

Use of the proposed MTR would be Monday through Friday between the hours of 6:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The frequency of use would be based on the number of test requirements, and the route would be scheduled no more than once per month, with an associated backup date. Each scheduled event would have a maximum of 4 aircraft per event for up to 48 aircraft operations annually. In addition, aircraft would not expend any items (e.g., chaff or flares) along the route. The Proposed Action would meet the purpose and need of conducting DT/OT with the F-35 and fifth-generation weapons, providing pilots, and developing weapon systems with realistic Instrumental Meteorological Conditions flight in a transition from a water environment across the shore to low-level flight over land.

Under Alternative 1, the FAA would create a new route, named IR-090, identical to the original IR-015. Under Alternative 1, IR-090 would originate over land east of Tallahassee, Florida, and flow south into the Eglin Gulf Test and Training Range's restricted airspace (R-2914A) then back over land toward the west/northwest. Route altitudes would be principally 500 feet above ground level to 5,000 feet MSL, with a corridor of 5 nautical miles on either side of the route centerline.

Alternative 1 meets the purpose and need. It would allow aircraft to test and train at altitudes below 5,000 feet MSL and at speeds above 250 knots indicated airspeed. Pilots in the Eglin Gulf Test and Training Range needing a water-to-land transition for a particular test scenario would enter the route between Point B and Point C. Thus, it could fully support all aspects of fifth-generation weapons testing. The scheduling and usage of the Alternative 1 route would be the same as that for the Proposed Action.

**No Action Alternative (EA §2.5, page 2-7):** The No Action Alternative represents baseline conditions experienced if the Proposed Action or Alternative 1 are not implemented over time. Under the No Action Alternative, there would not be a new MTR. Existing ranges are not able to support testing of new fifth-generation weapons systems and their component systems under baseline conditions which would continue under this alternative. Future testing demands and Department of Defense Directive 5100.1, which states one of the DAF's functions is to "organize, train, equip, and provide forces to conduct global precision attack, to include strategic attack and prompt global strike," would not be met.

The No Action Alternative would not advance the President's Indo-Pacific Strategy 2022. The capability to conduct DT on advanced fifth-generation weapons in an environment mimicking the Indo-Pacific region would be negated without this MTR.

**Alternatives Considered but Eliminated (EA §2.4, page 2-4):** A route originating in W-151 and crossing over Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, and Walton Counties was considered but not carried forward for analysis because the populations of the beachfront areas (Navarre, Fort Walton Beach, Destin, and Sandestin) are expected to continue growing in the future. In addition, the area between W-151 and the Eglin Restricted Areas is highly congested with civil and general aviation aircraft. Other routes considered but dismissed are discussed in the EA.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES**

Analysis was conducted to determine the potential impacts to the human and natural environment resulting from the Proposed Action and alternatives. Environmental analysis focused on the following resource areas: air quality, airspace, noise, land use and recreation, health and safety, environmental justice, biological resources, and cultural resources. No significant impacts to resources were identified (EA Chapter 3, pages 3-1 to 3-84).

**Air Quality (EA §3.2, pages 3-3 to 3-8):** There would be no significant impacts to air quality. All criteria pollutant emissions would be well below the significance indicator levels. Emissions associated with the Proposed Action would not generate significant quantities of any pollutants. Greenhouse gases would be below significance indicators and would not contribute to global warming. Therefore, there would be no significant impacts on air quality under the Proposed Action.

Under Alternative 1, criteria pollutant emissions would be slightly higher than the Proposed Action, but still well below the significance indicator levels. Emissions associated with Alternative 1 would not generate significant quantities of any pollutants. Greenhouse gases would be below significance indicators and would not contribute to global warming. There would be no significant impacts on air quality.

**Airspace Management (EA §3.3, pages 3-9 to 3-19):** Due to the very low volume of aircraft operations within the proposed MTR, and with Air Traffic Control coordination and following of utilization notes, there would be no significant impacts on airspace management under the Proposed Action. Prior to scheduling, the Scheduling Agency would issue a NOTAM, alerting the public of the use of the route.

Under Alternative 1, the proposed MTR would not significantly impact airspace operations or management in the region. Due to the very low volume of aircraft operations within the proposed MTR, and with Air Traffic Control coordination and following of utilization notes, there would be no significant impacts on airspace management under Alternative 1.

**Noise (EA §3.4, pages 3-19 to 3-29):** Time-averaged noise levels at sensitive locations within the proposed corridor were conservatively calculated to reflect operations occurring once or twice per week, but the actual operations tempo would be one scheduled operation per month with a backup date. Noise levels at sensitive locations within the proposed corridor would increase by as much as 0.3 A-weighted decibel (dBA) onset rate-adjusted monthly day-night average sound level ( $L_{dnmr}$ ) (0.3 dBA day-night average sound level [DNL]) at locations where levels would be at or below 48.6 dBA  $L_{dnmr}$  (48.4 dBA DNL). At the sensitive location beneath the proposed corridor with the highest noise level, the noise level would remain at 49.5 dBA  $L_{dnmr}$  (49.5 dBA DNL). Levels would remain below FAA thresholds for “significant” and “reportable” impacts and would also remain below the 55-dB level identified by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) for the protection of public health and welfare with an adequate margin of safety. Individual overflights, which could be as loud as 116 dBA  $L_{max}$ , could be startling and/or disruptive. However, flight operations would be relatively infrequent (48 aircraft operations per year flying 12 events a year with a maximum of 4 aircraft per event) and would be limited to daytime hours during weekdays. Noise impacts under the Proposed Action would not be expected to be considered significant.

Similar to the Proposed Action, under Alternative 1 noise levels at sensitive locations within the proposed corridor would increase by as much as 0.2 dBA  $L_{dnmr}$  (0.1 dBA DNL) at locations where levels would be at or below 48.5 dBA  $L_{dnmr}$  (48.2 dBA DNL). At the sensitive location beneath the proposed corridor with the highest noise level, the noise level would increase by 0.1 dBA  $L_{dnmr}$  (0.1 dBA DNL) to 49.5 dBA  $L_{dnmr}$  (49.5 dBA DNL). Levels would remain below FAA and USEPA thresholds. Individual overflights, which could be as loud as 116 dBA  $L_{max}$ , could be startling and/or disruptive. However, flight operations would be relatively infrequent (48 aircraft operations per year flying 12 events a year with a maximum of 4 aircraft per event) and would be limited to daytime hours during weekdays. Noise impacts under the Alternative 1 would not be expected to be considered significant.

**Land Use and Recreation (EA §3.5, pages 3-29 to 3-41):** There would be no significant impacts with regard to land use and recreation under the Proposed Action. The Proposed Action would not result in incompatible land usage. Noise levels would remain well below 65 dB DNL and would be compatible with

all land use categories. Direct overflights would be infrequent (one to two per month) but would potentially cause only annoyance and startle effects to humans, livestock, and wildlife. Impacts under the Proposed Action would not be expected to be considered significant.

Under Alternative 1, noise levels would remain well below 65 dB DNL and would be compatible with all land use categories. Direct overflights would be infrequent (one to two per month) but would potentially cause only annoyance and startle effects to humans, livestock, and wildlife. Impacts under Alternative 1 would not be expected to be significant.

**Health and Safety Resources (EA §3.6, pages 3-41 to 3-49):** There would be no adverse impacts to safety under the Proposed Action from obstructions, interactions with airfields, or conflicts with aircraft within other military and commercial airspace. The one vertical obstruction has been noted and would be avoided. Scheduling and communication between 96 TW and other entities would deconflict route usage with other entities. Prior to scheduling, the Scheduling Agency would issue a NOTAM, alerting the public of the use of the route. Thus, the establishment of IR-090 under the Proposed Action would not have a significant adverse effect on the existing health and safety environment.

Under Alternative 1, there would be more safety considerations along the alternative MTR, such as a higher number of obstructions to avoid, closer proximity to the Tallahassee and Northwest Florida Beaches International Airports, and more overlap of other flight activity. However, since safety was not a significant issue when IR-015 was originally in existence, and there are no records of mishaps, safety is not expected to be significantly affected under Alternative 1. Prior to scheduling, the Scheduling Agency would issue a NOTAM, alerting the public of the use of the route.

**Environmental Justice (EA §3.7, pages 3-50 to 3-60):** Increased noise levels from the Proposed Action would not be significant and would not result in adverse or disproportionate environmental impacts or health and safety risks to minority and low-income populations. Therefore, there would be no adverse impacts to minority, low-income, or other sensitive populations associated with implementing the Proposed Action.

Increased noise levels from Alternative 1 would not be significant and would not result in adverse or disproportionate environmental impacts or health and safety risks to minority and low-income populations. Therefore, there would be no adverse impacts to minority, low-income, or other sensitive populations associated with implementing Alternative 1.

**Biological Resources (EA §3.8, pages 3-60 to 3-79):** Within the proposed MTR corridor, wildlife and domestic animals exposed to overflights may experience stress and behavioral modifications with the initial increase in the soundscape in portions of the corridor and may exhibit startle responses from peak noise levels. However, exposure to overflight noise would be brief and infrequent, allowing animals periods of time between exposures to recover, and some animals would likely acclimate to the new soundscape over time. Animal communication signals may be temporarily masked by aircraft noise but would last only a few seconds. Given the low number of operations (one to times per month) and the limitation of operations to daylight hours, combined with Bird/Wildlife Aircraft Strike Hazard protocols and the avoidance zones over St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge and the Apalachicola River and floodplains, the likelihood of a bird/bat/butterfly-aircraft strike is low. Therefore, overall impacts to wildlife, domestic animals, federally listed species, bald eagles, and migratory birds under the Proposed Action would not be significant. United States Fish and Wildlife Service Section 7 concurrence was signed on July 10, 2024, and is provided in Appendix B (Agency Correspondence and Consultations) of the EA.

Under Alternative 1, the types of potential Impacts to wildlife and domestic animals exposed to overflights would be similar to those for the Proposed Action, but there would be the potential for effects to animals located within the additional 260,000 acres under the MTR, including new portions of the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge and Bradwell Bay Wilderness, approximately 64,000 more acres of wildlife management areas, as well as other new conservation lands. However, exposures would last only a few seconds and occur one to two times per month. Bird/Wildlife Aircraft Strike Hazard protocols would be implemented so that the potential for strikes and noise impacts would be expected to be minimal if this route is created. Overall impacts to wildlife, domestic animals, federally listed species, bald eagles, and migratory birds under Alternative 1 would not reach significant levels.

**Cultural Resources (EA §3.9, pages 3-79 to 3-84):** There would be no significant impacts with regards to cultural resources under the Proposed Action. There are no known historic properties within the Area of Potential Effects that would be expected to be directly or indirectly affected by the Proposed Action. There would be no ground-disturbing activities associated with the Proposed Action. As a result, no archeological resources would be directly or indirectly impacted by the Proposed Action. None of the 19 submerged shipwrecks would be expected to be directly or indirectly impacted by the Proposed Action. Consultation with Native American tribes, the State Historic Preservation Officer, and Section 106 process are completed. Confirmation with the DAF of No Effect or no concerns was received by the Poarch Band of Creek Indians (on May 23, 2024), the Seminole Tribe of Florida (on May 6, 2024), the Muscogee Nation (on June 4, 2024), the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida (on June 3, 2024), and the Director, Division of Historical Resources and State Historic Preservation Officer (on June 4, 2024) (see Appendix B, Agency Correspondence and Consultations, of the EA), with response pending for two tribes (Seminole Band of Oklahoma and Thlopthlocco Tribal Town in Oklahoma).

There are no known historic properties within the Area of Potential Effects that would be expected to be directly or indirectly affected by Alternative 1. There would be no ground-disturbing activities associated with Alternative 1. As a result, no archeological resources would be directly or indirectly impacted by Alternative 1.

## AGENCY AND PUBLIC COMMENT

The DAF prepared a Draft EA to inform the public of the Proposed Action and allow the opportunity for public review and comment. The Draft EA 30-day review period began with a public notice published in the *Northwest Florida Daily News* and the *Tallahassee Democrat* on April 19, 2024. The notice described the Proposed Action, solicited public comments on the Draft EA and Draft FONSI, provided public comment review dates, and announced that a copy of the EA would be available for review on the Eglin AFB website: <https://www.eglin.af.mil/About-Us/Eglin-Documents/>. No comments were received. The DAF prepared a revised Draft EA and Draft FONSI with many changes to reflect completed consultations and substantive clarifications, republished it in those same publications and made it available on the Eglin AFB website no later than August 9, 2024. The DAF reopened the comment period for an additional 30 days. One comment was received by a private citizen who raised concerns about noise and safety issues, (see Appendix D, Public Involvement, for the comment letter). Minor changes were made in Section 3.4.1.1 (Analysis Methodology) (page 3-20) and Section 3.4.3.1 (Proposed Action) to Table 3-7 (page 3-25).

## FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Based on my review of the facts and analyses contained in the attached EA, conducted under the provisions of NEPA, CEQ regulations, and 32 CFR Part 989, I conclude that implementation of the Proposed Action or Alternative 1 would not have a significant impact on the human or natural environment. Accordingly, an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. The signing of this FONSI fulfills the requirements of NEPA, CEQ regulations, and 32 CFR Part 989.

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DATE