

1 **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

2  
3 **FOR ESTABLISHMENT OF MILITARY TRAINING ROUTE – INSTRUMENT ROUTE**  
4 **(IR)-096**  
5 **FOR**  
6 **EGLIN AIR FORCE BASE**  
7  
8 **RCS 21-284**

9 Pursuant to the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations for implementing the procedural  
10 provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Title 42 United States (U.S.) Code  
11 Section 4321; Title 40 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Sections 1500–1508; and the  
12 Department of the Air Force (DAF) Environmental Impact Analysis Process, 32 CFR Section 989,  
13 the DAF, as the lead agency, has prepared this Establishment of Military Training Route – Instrument  
14 Route (IR)-096 for Eglin Air Force Base (AFB) to consider the potential consequences to the human  
15 and natural environment associated with establishing a military training route (MTR).

16 The purpose of the Proposed Action, which is the Preferred Alternative, is for the 96th Test Wing  
17 (96 TW) at Eglin AFB to test new weapon systems and their components in an all-weather, long-  
18 range, low-altitude setting with a water-to-land transition that terminates in a land range underlying  
19 restricted airspace. Programs that could use the proposed route include the AGM-158 Joint Air-to-  
20 Surface Standoff Missile Extended Range and the Low-Cost Cruise Missile, which are both part of  
21 fifth-generation weapons development and testing. These medium to long range weapons require low-  
22 altitude testing (2,000 to 5,000 feet above ground level [AGL]) and routes originating at a launch  
23 point within warning airspace and terminating on an air-to-ground range at speeds in excess of 250  
24 knots indicated airspeed. A new low-level long-range route that crosses from water to land would  
25 support the President’s Indo-Pacific Strategy 2022 of advancing an integrated deterrence toward  
26 aggression and coercion against peer adversaries by mimicking the environment of the Indo-Pacific  
27 region. The Department of Defense’s (DoD’s) acting Director of Operational Test and Evaluation has  
28 stressed real-world mission success and national security reflect the operational testing performed.

29 **DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES**

30 Chapter 2 of the Environmental Assessment (EA) provides details and descriptions of the Proposed  
31 Action and the No Action Alternative.

32 **Proposed Action (EA Section 2.2, pages 2-1 to 2-3):**

33 The Proposed Action consists of the 96 TW requesting the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)  
34 to create a new low-altitude IR, named IR-096, in the southeast United States similar to a previous  
35 route, IR-015, but with some changes to the configuration to meet current operational testing (OT)  
36 and developmental testing (DT), and training needs, such as long-range transition from water to land.  
37 The route would support low-level flight for terrain masking/maneuvering. The curvature of Earth  
38 over the distance of the route, and locations of radars on the western Eglin range, allow for terrain

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1 masking along this route. The point of origin would be over water on the boundary of Warning Area  
2 W-470. From W-470, the proposed route would flow north for 22 nautical miles, continuing to flow  
3 west/northwest into the DAF restricted airspace block, R-2914A. The floor of the proposed route  
4 would be 500 feet AGL, and the ceiling would be 5,000 feet AGL.

5 Use of the proposed MTR would be Monday through Friday between the hours of 6:00 a.m. to 5:00  
6 p.m. The frequency of use based on the number of test requirements would be approximately four to  
7 eight times monthly (one to two times per week). In addition, these missions would not use flares,  
8 chaff, or any expenditures along the route. A typical mission could look like an F-35 flying high speed  
9 and low level, attempting to determine which emitter located on the Eglin Range is an actual threat,  
10 or captive carrying a new weapon system and testing its guidance system.

11 The Proposed Action would meet the purpose and need of conducting DT/OT with the F-35 and  
12 fifth-generation weapons.

13 **No Action Alternative (EA Section 2.5, page 2-4):**

14 Under the No Action Alternative, there would not be a new MTR. Future testing demands and DoD  
15 Directive 5100.1, which states one of the DAF’s functions is to “organize, train, equip, and provide  
16 forces to...conduct global precision attack, to include strategic attack...and prompt global strike”  
17 would not be met.

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

21 **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

22 Analysis was conducted to determine the potential impacts to the human and natural environment  
23 resulting from the Proposed Action and alternatives. Environmental analysis focused on the following  
24 resource areas: air quality, airspace, noise, land use and recreation, health and safety, environmental  
25 justice, biological resources, and cultural resources. No significant impacts to resources were  
26 identified (EA Chapter 3, pages 3-1 to 3-80).

27 **Air Quality (EA Section 3.2, pages 3-2 to 3-7):**

28 There would be no significant impacts to air quality. The addition of the small increases in aircraft  
29 emissions associated with the Proposed Action would not be sufficient to elevate the total cumulative  
30 air emissions to a significant impact. The increased air emissions associated with the Proposed Action  
31 would not be sufficient to elevate total cumulative air emissions beyond negligible levels.

32 **Airspace Management (EA Section 3.3, pages 3-8 to 3-18)**

33 All aircraft operations under each alternative would be subject to the regulatory requirement currently  
34 governing military and civilian aircraft operations and pilot responsibilities within the affected  
35 airspace environment. Civil aviation could operate within this aeronautical environment in the same

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1 safe, familiar manner as currently flown within the area. Considering the projected civil and military  
2 flight densities in this joint-use airspace and available information on the scheduled use of the MTRs,  
3 this alternative would have no known adverse effects on the low-density Visual Flight Rules or  
4 Instrument Flight Rules air traffic in the affected area.

5 The Proposed Action included 92 flight operations annually for the F-35A and F-15E combined. Due  
6 to the very low volume of aircraft operations within the proposed modified IR-015, and with Air  
7 Traffic Control coordination and following of utilization notes, there would be no adverse impacts on  
8 airspace management associated with the Proposed Action.

9 **Noise (EA Section 3.4, pages 3-18 to 3-27):**

10 There would be no significant impacts to noise. The Proposed Action would not exceed thresholds  
11 established in FAA Order 1050.1F for “significant” or “reportable” impacts at sensitive locations, and  
12 noise levels would remain below the 55 dB noise level identified by the U.S. Environmental  
13 Protection Agency (USEPA) as being protective of public health and welfare. Furthermore, much of  
14 the proposed MTR corridor is beneath existing military training airspace and experiences overflight  
15 noise under baseline conditions. In this potentially affected environment, the degree of effects of the  
16 Proposed Action would not be expected to be considered significant.

17 **Land Use and Recreation (EA Section 3.5, pages 3-28 to 3-40):**

18 There would be no significant impacts with regard to land use and recreation under the Proposed  
19 Action. Noise levels generated by air operations under the Proposed Action would be compatible with  
20 all land uses beneath the associated MTR, and noise impacts on the public are expected to be relatively  
21 minor and limited to annoyance and speech/activity interference. Other existing MTRs, R-2914A,  
22 and Tyndall C Military Operations Area currently experience low-altitude overflights to which local  
23 communities and residents have become familiar. To minimize noise impacts on surrounding  
24 communities, various noise abatement procedures, including avoidance areas of specific noise-  
25 sensitive areas will be implemented.

26 **Health and Safety Resources (EA Section 3.6, pages 3-40 to 3-46):**

27 No significant impacts to health and safety are expected under the Proposed Action. Six structures are  
28 located along the proposed MTR and would be avoided as pilots would adjust altitude and course  
29 accordingly. The proposed MTR overlaps with Tyndall airspace and arrivals into Northwest Florida  
30 Beaches International Airport, but because the route would occupy a different altitude in the airspace  
31 (4,000 feet AGL) than the airport arrivals (5,000 feet AGL) there would be no conflict or safety  
32 concerns.

33 There is a potential for bird–aircraft collisions and the DAF monitors and manages the risk on a near  
34 real-time basis through the Avian Hazard Advisory System. The DAF Avian Hazard Advisory  
35 System models and tracks the status of bird strike hazards, informs pilots, and reduces the potential  
36 for encounters of aircraft with birds. Most importantly, pilots are trained to respond to inflight  
37 emergencies and hazards in the safest manner possible, including avoiding populated areas.

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1 As a result of coordination and communication, there would be no adverse impacts to safety under  
2 the Proposed Action from obstructions, interactions with airfields, or conflicts with aircraft within  
3 other military and commercial airspace. Vertical obstructions have been noted and will be avoided.  
4 Scheduling and communication between 96 TW and other entities would deconflict route usage with  
5 other entities.

6 **Environmental Justice (EA Section 3.7, pages 3-47 to 3-57):**

7 Noise levels would increase in areas underlying the proposed training route corridor but would remain  
8 below 55 decibels, the level identified by USEPA as protecting human health and welfare. Sensitive  
9 receptors such as daycares, hospitals, nursing homes, and schools under the proposed training route  
10 corridor were evaluated for noise impacts. Five of the 11 sensitive receptors under the proposed  
11 training corridor would experience increases in noise levels. These increases would range from 0.1 to  
12 2.9 A-weighted decibel (dBA) onset rate-adjusted monthly day-night average sound level ( $L_{dnmr}$ ) with  
13 total dBA  $L_{dnmr}$  ranging from 48.4 to 51.8. The highest  $L_{dnmr}$  of 51.8 dBA would occur at the Home  
14 Sweet Home Adult Living Facility. Overflights may also startle individuals. However, overflights at  
15 very high engine power and at the lowest allowable altitude would be rare, and maximum noise level  
16 exposure would last only a few seconds. The increase in noise levels would not be significant and  
17 would not result in adverse environmental impacts or health and safety risks to human populations.  
18 Therefore, there would be no adverse impacts to minority, low-income, or other sensitive populations  
19 associated with implementing the Proposed Action.

20 **Biological Resources (EA Section 3.8, pages 3-57 to 3-76):**

21 Within the proposed MTR corridor, wildlife and domestic animals exposed to overflights may  
22 experience stress and behavioral modifications with the initial increase in the soundscape in portions  
23 of the corridor and may exhibit startle responses from peak noise levels. However, exposure to  
24 overflight noise would be brief and infrequent, allowing animals periods of time between exposures  
25 to recover, and some animals would likely acclimate to the new soundscape over time. Animal  
26 communication signals may be temporarily masked by aircraft noise but would last only a few  
27 seconds. Given the low number of operations (maximum of eight times monthly) and the limitation  
28 of operations to daylight hours, combined with Bird/Wildlife Aircraft Strike Hazard protocols and the  
29 avoidance zones over St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge and the Apalachicola River and  
30 floodplains, the likelihood of a bird, bat, butterfly aircraft strike is low. Therefore, overall impacts to  
31 wildlife, domestic animals, federally listed species, bald eagles, and migratory birds under the  
32 Proposed Action would not reach significant levels.

33 **Cultural Resources (EA Section 3.9, pages 3-76 to 3-80):**

34 There would be no significant impacts with regards to cultural resources under the Proposed Action.  
35 It is not anticipated historic properties within the Area of Potential Effects would be directly or  
36 indirectly affected by the Proposed Action. As no ground-disturbing activity is part of the Proposed  
37 Action; aircraft operations would have minimal to no direct impact on historic properties within the  
38 boundaries of the MTR. The potential for aircraft mishaps to directly impact cultural resources exists  
39 but is highly unlikely. The potential for indirect auditory and visual impacts does exist with aircraft

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1 operations. None of the 19 shipwrecks identified are located along the coast. It can be presumed they  
2 are submerged and would not be adversely affected by the project.

3 Consultation with Native American tribes, the State Historic Preservation Officer, and completion of  
4 the Section 106 process are underway. Should historic properties that may be affected be identified  
5 within this area, avoidance of the resource or other additional mitigation measures would be  
6 necessary. Until the Section 106 process is complete, there is a potential danger of indirect or direct  
7 adverse effects to any historic properties present.

8 Per Standard Operating Procedure #7.4 of the Eglin AFB Integrated Cultural Resources Management  
9 Plan, if suspected cultural resources or human remains or funerary objects are inadvertently  
10 discovered, all actions in the immediate vicinity would stop, and efforts would be made to protect the  
11 find from further impact. The Cultural Resources Office would be contacted to assess the find and  
12 determine what legal and procedural activities are required.

13 **PUBLIC REVIEW**

14 The DAF prepared a Draft EA to inform the public of the Proposed Action and allow the  
15 opportunity for public review and comment. The Draft EA 30-day review period will begin with  
16 a public notice published in the *Northwest Florida Daily News* and the *Tallahassee Democrat* on  
17 19 April 2024. The notice describes the Proposed Action, solicits public comments on the Draft  
18 EA and Draft Finding of No Significant Impact, provides public comment review dates, and  
19 announces that a copy of the EA would be available for review on the Eglin AFB website:  
20 <https://www.eglin.af.mil/About-Us/Eglin-Documents/>.

21 **FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

22 Based on my review of the facts and analyses contained in the attached EA, conducted under the  
23 provisions of NEPA, CEQ regulations, and 32 CFR Part 989, I conclude that implementation of the  
24 Proposed Action would not have a significant impact on the human or natural environment.  
25 Accordingly, an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. The signing of this Finding of No  
26 Significant Impact fulfills the requirements of NEPA, CEQ regulations, and 32 CFR Part 989.

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28 KEVIN J. OSBORNE, Colonel, USAF  
29 Commander, 96th Civil Engineer Group

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DATE