

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE
Department of the Navy

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT/FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT HARM
(FONSI/FONSH) FOR ICE EXERCISE 2024**

Pursuant to the Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] Parts 1500–1508) implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Executive Order (EO) 12114 (*Environmental Effects Abroad of Major Federal Actions*), and Department of Defense regulations found at 32 Code of Federal Regulations Part 187, the Navy gives notice that a Supplemental Environmental Assessment/Overseas Environmental Assessment (EA/OEA) was prepared for the conduct of an Ice Exercise (ICEX) north of Alaska during February to April 2024.

Proposed Action: The Proposed Action is to conduct submarine training and testing activities and to conduct research in an Arctic environment. To support this action, an underwater tracking range and temporary ice camp would be established. The Proposed Action would occur over a six-week period from February through April 2024 (considered winter through early spring). The entire Proposed Action, including construction and demobilization of the ice camp, would occur over this six-week period, whereas the submarine training and testing and the research activities would occur over approximately four weeks during the six-week period. The 2022 ICEX EA/OEA offers coverage of Beta camps; as there is no change to the analysis for Beta camps, they will not be discussed further in this FONSI/FONSH.

Purpose and Need: The primary purpose of the Proposed Action is to evaluate the employment and tactics of submarine operability in an Arctic environment. Secondly, the Proposed Action would also evaluate emerging technologies and assess capabilities in the Arctic environment; and gather data on Arctic environmental conditions.

The need for the Proposed Action is to prepare forces capable of extended operations and warfighting in the Arctic in accordance with Title 10 United States Code (U.S.C.) § 8062 and the strategies outlined in *A Blue Arctic*.

Alternatives Considered: The Proposed Action is the same from the 2022 ICEX EA/OEA. To develop and screen alternatives, the Navy used the following criteria:

- ICEX must be conducted during a time of year when there are sufficient hours of daylight to support several hours of training and testing each day.
- The location must be on a large area of stable ice that does not have (and is not likely to develop) leads or “gaps” and can sustain a runway and a camp for several weeks.
- The location must have sufficient water depth to accommodate safe submarine activities.
- The location must be in sufficient proximity to shore logistics centers to allow for transfers of personnel and equipment to and from the ice camp.

Based on these screening criteria, a No Action Alternative and the Proposed Action were analyzed.

Under the **No Action Alternative**, Navy would not establish an ice camp and would not conduct submarine training and testing activities or research in the Arctic in winter/spring 2024. This alternative required no analysis of potential consequences to environmental resources as no action would occur.

Under the **Proposed Action**, Navy would establish an ice camp and conduct submarine training and testing, and various research activities, at and near the camp in winter/spring 2024.

Other **action alternatives considered but not carried forward for detailed analysis** include geographic, seasonal, and operational variations. As discussed in the screening criteria, holding ICEX in a

different location or at a different time of year would not satisfy the purpose and need. For example, holding ICEX closer to shore would not afford sufficiently thick ice to support an ice camp as well as the submarine tracking range to conduct the required submarine training and testing. Positioning the camp further from shore would put the camp beyond the reach of logistics support required to sustain the activity. Seasonal alternatives are likewise not feasible because the ice conditions required to support the ice camp are only available in the timeframe identified for the Proposed Action.

Environmental Effects: The Supplemental EA/OEA evaluated the Proposed Action in terms of stressors and their potential to impact natural and physical resources. The stressor associated with this Proposed Action is acoustic transmissions, which was analyzed for potential impacts to marine mammals. Resources that were not considered for analysis because the Proposed Action has no potential to affect them include air quality, airspace, terrestrial wildlife (except Arctic fox), deep sea corals and coral reefs, and sea turtles. All other resources and stressors were previously considered and analyzed in the 2022 ICEX EA/OEA. Table 1 provides the determination summary for all resources analyzed in the 2022 ICEX EA/OEA.

Table 1. Effects Determination Summary for the 2022 ICEX EA/OEA

Resource	Proposed Action
Air Quality	No significant impact/harm
Bottom Substrate	No significant impact/harm
Water Quality	No significant impact/harm
Marine Vegetation	No significant impact/harm
Invertebrates	No significant impact/harm
Marine Birds	No significant impact/harm
Fish	No significant impact/harm
Essential Fish Habitat	No significant impact/harm
Mammals	No significant impact/harm; May affect, but not likely to adversely affect, polar bears; May affect, likely to adversely affect, ringed seals; Incidental Harassment Authorization (IHA) for ringed seals.
Conclusion	No significant impact/harm to the environment

As described in the Supplemental EA/OEA, implementation of the Proposed Action would result in no significant impact/harm to the natural and physical environments. The stressors associated with this Proposed Action are acoustic transmissions, which were completely re-analyzed for potential impacts to marine mammals, and on-ice vehicle noise and human presence, which were re-analyzed in part for the purpose of determining polar bear impacts. A complete analysis for these stressors can be found in the ICEX EA/OEA. No significant impact/harm to marine mammals is expected.

Mitigation and Standard Operating Procedures: The following standard operating procedures would be implemented:

- The location for any air-dropped equipment and material would be visually surveyed prior to release of the equipment/material to ensure the landing zone is clear. Equipment and materials would not be released if any animal is observed within the landing zone.
- Air drop bundles would be packed within a plywood structure with honeycomb insulation to protect the material from damage.
- Spill response kits/material would be on-site prior to the air-drop of any hazardous material (e.g., fuel).

In addition to the standard operating procedures above, the following mitigation measures would be implemented to reduce or avoid potential harm to marine resources.

- The ice camp and runway must be established on multi-year ice without pressure ridges.
- Ice camp deployment would begin mid-February and be gradual, with activity increasing over the first five days and must be completed by March 15, 2024. This allows ringed seals to avoid the camp area prior to pupping, further reducing potential impacts.
- Appropriate personnel (including civilian personnel) involved in mitigation and training or testing activity must complete Arctic Environmental and Safety Awareness Training. Modules include: Arctic Species Awareness and Mitigations, Environmental Considerations, Hazardous Materials Management, and General Safety.
- When traveling away from camp, each snow machine must have a dedicated observer (not the vehicle operator) or each expeditionary team must have at least one observer. Observers must be capable of observing and recording marine mammal presence and behaviors, and accurately and completely record data. When traveling, observers will have no other primary duty than to watch for and report observations related to marine mammals and human/seal interactions. Dedicated observers can also serve as the communicator between the field party and camp.
- Personnel on all on-ice vehicles would observe for marine and terrestrial animals; any marine or terrestrial animal observed on the ice would be avoided by 328 feet (ft; 100 meters [m]). On-ice vehicles would not be used to follow any animal, with the exception of actively deterring polar bears if the situation requires.
- Snowmobiles would follow established routes, when available. On-ice vehicles will not be used to follow any animal, with the exception of actively deterring polar bears if the situation requires.
- Personnel on foot and operating on-ice vehicles would avoid areas of deep (>0.5 m) snowdrifts and pressure ridges by 0.8 km.
- All material (e.g., tents, unused food, excess fuel) and wastes (e.g., solid waste, hazardous waste) would be removed from the ice floe upon completion of ICEX 2024 activities.
- Ice camp personnel must monitor for marine mammals in the vicinity of the ice camp and record all observations of marine mammals, regardless of distance from the ice camp.

Shutdown and Delay Measures:

- Navy personnel would begin passive acoustic monitoring (PAM) 15 minutes prior to start of activities involving active acoustic transmissions from submarines.
- Navy personnel would delay active acoustic transmissions if a marine mammal is detected during pre-activity PAM and must shutdown active acoustic transmissions if marine mammals are detected during acoustic transmissions.
- Navy personnel would not restart acoustic transmissions until 15 minutes have passed with no marine mammal detections.

Mitigation required for aircraft activities:

- Fixed wing aircraft would operate at highest altitudes practicable taking into account safety of personnel, meteorological conditions and need to support safe operations of a drifting ice camp. Aircraft would not reduce altitude if a seal is observed on the ice. In general, cruising elevation would be 1,500 ft (500 m) or higher.
- Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UASs) would maintain a minimum altitude of at least 50 ft (15.2 m) above the ice. They would not be used to track or follow marine mammals.
- Helicopter flights would use prescribed transit corridors when traveling to/from Prudhoe Bay and the ice camp. Helicopters would not hover or circle above or within 1,500 ft (475 m) of groups of marine mammals.
- Aircraft would maintain a minimum separation distance of 1 mi (1.6 km) from groups of five or more seals.
- Aircraft would not land on ice within 0.5 mi (800 m) of hauled-out pinnipeds.

General Camp Mitigations:

- Dish and hand soap would be selected from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s “Safer Choice” list.
- All cooking and food consumption would occur within designated facilities to minimize attraction of nearby animals.
- All personnel will be required to complete environmental compliance training including environmental health and safety procedures.

Agency Consultation and Coordination:

Marine Mammal Protection Act:

- Ringed Seal: The Navy applied for an incidental harassment authorization (IHA) for the taking of ringed seals on May 24, 2023. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) issued an IHA on January 31, 2024, which authorizes incidental harassment of ringed seals during ICEX 2024.
- Polar Bear: The Navy requested an intentional take (deterrence) of polar bears on August 8, 2023. A letter of authorization (LOA) was received by USFWS on February 9, 2024. The USFWS LOA authorizes the intentional taking of polar bears for the safety of personnel and polar bears through active deterrence measures during ICEX 2024.

Endangered Species Act:

- Ringed Seal: The Navy formally consulted with the NMFS, Alaska Region, on ringed seals by submitting a Biological Evaluation on August 8, 2023. NMFS issued a Biological Opinion on January 11, 2024.
- Polar Bear: The Navy informally consulted with USFWS, Fairbanks Fish and Wildlife Field Office, on polar bears; the consultation was submitted to USFWS on October 3, 2023. USFWS concurred with Navy’s determination of may affect, but not likely to adversely affect, on January 8, 2024.

Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act: Through consultation for previous ICEXs, NMFS concluded that the Proposed Action would not likely reduce the quality or quantity of Essential Fish Habitat, therefore further consultation was not necessary.

Public Outreach: As part of the NEPA process, the Navy made the Supplemental EA/OEA for this ICEX available via www.nepa.navy.mil/ICEX and had a 15-day open comment period from September 29 to October 13, 2023. Additionally, the availability of the Supplemental EA/OEA was published in the Arctic Sounder as well as on the Arctic Sounder website.

Finding: After a review of the ICEX Supplemental EA/OEA, which has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of NEPA and EO 12114 and Navy guidance for implementing NEPA and EO 12114 (M-5090.1), the Navy finds that conduct of an ICEX as implemented through the Proposed Action will not significantly impact or harm the quality of the natural and physical environments. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement/Overseas Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared.

Electronic copies of the Supplemental EA/OEA, including this FONSI/FONSH, can be obtained from Ms. Laura Busch, U.S. Fleet Forces, 1562 Mitscher Ave Bldg NH3N, Norfolk, VA, 23551.

Date

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