

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE
Department of the Navy

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT FOR THE MULTI-ENGINE TRAINING SYSTEM
AT NAVAL AIR STATION CORPUS CHRISTI, TEXAS**

Pursuant to the Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] Parts 1500–1508) implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Department of the Navy (Navy) NEPA regulations (32 CFR Part 775), the Navy gives notice that an Environmental Assessment (EA) has been prepared and an Environmental Impact Statement is not required for replacement of 54 T-44C Pegasus with 58 new T-54A aircraft and the upgrade of ground-based training technologies at Naval Air Station (NAS) Corpus Christi, Texas, collectively referred to as the Multi-Engine Training System (METS). This action will be implemented as set out in Alternative 1.

Proposed Action: U.S. Fleet Forces Command on behalf of Chief of Naval Air Training, a Command of the U.S. Navy (hereinafter, jointly referred to as the Navy), proposes to replace aircraft used for the multi-engine maritime flight training program. This training program is operated by Commander, Training Air Wing Four, located at NAS Corpus Christi. The Proposed Action includes replacement of 54 T-44C Pegasus aircraft with 58 new T-54A (based on the commercial Beechcraft King Air 260) aircraft. The aircraft would conduct training operations at the same locations and within the same airspace as T-44C aircraft but with an increase in the number of operations. The Proposed Action also includes short- and long-term construction projects for Navy support facilities at NAS Corpus Christi.

Purpose and Need: The purpose of the Proposed Action is to replace the T-44C aircraft that are over 40 years old and require upgrades to address existing training capability gaps. The T-44C fleet is nearing the end of its service life and has outdated avionics, limited availability of parts, and increased maintenance cost. The replacement of aircraft would provide advanced instrumentation for communication, navigation, and tracking aircraft health to facilitate maintenance planning and efficiency. The need for the Proposed Action is to enable continued aviator training in furtherance of the Navy's mandate to train and equip Naval forces for the peacetime promotion of the national security interests and prosperity of the United States and for prompt and sustained combat incident to operations at sea.

Alternatives Considered: The EA analyzes the potential environmental impacts of the following alternatives:

No Action Alternative. Under the No Action Alternative, the T-44C aircraft would not be replaced. The over 40-year-old T-44C aircraft would continue to operate despite capacity and capability gaps. The No Action Alternative would not meet the purpose and need for the Proposed Action; however, as required by NEPA, the No Action Alternative is carried forward for analysis in this EA. The No Action Alternative will be used to analyze the consequences of not undertaking the

Proposed Action and will serve to establish a comparative baseline for analysis of environmental impacts associated with the Proposed Action.

Alternative 1: Replace T-44C Aircraft with T-54A Aircraft with a 10 Percent Increase in Operations (Preferred Alternative). Alternative 1 includes replacing 54 T-44C aircraft with 58 T-54A aircraft; an increase in operations; and implementation of short- and long-term construction projects for Navy support facilities. The Proposed Action would take place at NAS Corpus Christi in Texas and its associated training locations at Naval Outlying Landing Field (NOLF) Cabaniss; at international, regional, and publicly owned municipal airfields; and in the Federal Aviation Administration's National Airspace System throughout South Texas. To accommodate the new aircraft, short- and long-term construction projects for Navy support facilities at NAS Corpus Christi would be required, including adding fire detection and suppression systems to Hangar 42; Flight operations would increase by approximately 10 percent over the No Action Alternative, but personnel numbers would remain the same as current conditions. Current staffing levels would be able to manage the 10 percent increase in operations, which would be similar to surge conditions that arise due to weather and/or maintenance delays followed by an increase in operations. This alternative reflects the forecasted increase in student pilot training necessary to support Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard aviation requirements in the foreseeable future.

Alternative 2: Replace T-44C Aircraft with T-54A Aircraft with a 20 Percent Increase in Operations. Alternative 2 includes the same aircraft replacement and demolition, new construction, and renovation of Navy support facilities as Alternative 1 but with an increase in flight operations of approximately 20 percent over the No Action Alternative. With this increase in flight operations, the Navy estimates that there would be an increase of 33 additional personnel and their families at NAS Corpus Christi. Alternative 2 assesses a level of operations based on increases in demand for ready naval forces in response to national security requirements. This alternative reflects the maximum forecasted student pilot training necessary to support Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard aviation requirements in the foreseeable future.

Alternatives Dismissed from Further Consideration: The following alternatives were considered but not carried forward for detailed analysis in this EA, as they did not meet the purpose and need for the project and satisfy the reasonable alternative screening factors:

- Relocating the pilot training mission from NAS Corpus Christi to another training station
- Changing the percent of flight training operations at various NOLFs and international, regional, and publicly owned municipal airfields
- Replacing aircraft but no increase in operations
- Evaluating multiple Navy support facilities renovation and construction options

Environmental Effects: No significant direct, indirect, or cumulative environmental impacts would occur from implementing the Proposed Action. Certain environmental resources (water resources, geological resources, land use, visual resources, airspace, infrastructure, transportation, public health and safety, hazardous materials and wastes, and socioeconomics)

were not analyzed in detail in this EA because implementation of the proposed action would not be likely to result in any potential environmental impacts on these resources or impacts would be negligible. Potential environmental impacts to noise, environmental justice, biological resources, cultural resources, and air quality are summarized here.

Noise: The number of off-station land acres exposed to 65 A-weighted decibels sound level (dBA) day-night average sound level (DNL) or greater at NAS Corpus Christi would increase by one, from 50 to 51, and the estimated number of off-station residents exposed to 65 dBA DNL or greater would remain at 91. Noise levels would not increase at representative locations near NAS Corpus Christi. Noise levels near NOLF Cabaniss would increase by 0.5 dBA DNL or less and would remain below 65 dBA DNL. Speech interference events per average daytime hour would increase by one or less at the locations studied. Noise levels at all schools studied would remain below 60 dBA eight-hour equivalent sound level ($L_{eq(8hr)}$). Aircraft noise levels near international, regional, and publicly owned municipal airfields would remain below 65 dBA DNL at nearby sensitive locations or would not change measurably (i.e., change would be less than 0.1 dBA DNL and rounds to zero). Noise changes at NAS Corpus Christi and NOLF Cabaniss associated with Alternative 1 would be minimal compared to the No Action Alternative. Changes in noise levels at international, regional, and publicly owned municipal airports were analyzed using a screening analysis and no locations were identified that warranted further analysis. The Navy has determined that there would be no environmental health and safety risks that would disproportionately affect children. Therefore, implementation of Alternative 1 would not result in significant impacts to the noise environment.

Environmental Justice: The environmental justice analysis shows that there are minority and low-income populations present within the 65 dBA DNL noise contour off-station at NAS Corpus Christi. There would be minor changes to noise levels under Alternative 1 compared to the No Action Alternative. To determine if disproportionately high and adverse impacts to minority populations and low-income populations occur, a comparison group was selected to provide context for the analysis of human health effects, environmental effects, and the hazard exposure to minority and low-income populations to non-environmental justice communities. All populations would experience minor increases in noise levels under Alternative 1. Therefore, the Navy concluded that under Alternative 1, there would not be disproportionately high and adverse effects on minority and low-income populations. Public outreach included posting the EA on the project website; providing hard copies of the Draft EA to 10 libraries, some of which are located near the affected neighborhoods; and placing ads in local newspapers.

Biological Resources: There would be a 10 percent increase in aircraft operations at NAS Corpus Christi, NOLF Cabaniss, and international, regional, and publicly owned municipal airfields (from 184,672 to 203,000 annual operations). No changes to existing flight paths, procedures, or habitat would occur. The Navy would continue to manage airfield environments in accordance with its Bird/Animal Aircraft Strike Hazard Reduction Plan to reduce the likelihood of aircraft

collisions with federally and state-protected species. Wildlife inhabiting these highly disturbed and human-maintained areas in the region of influence would be expected to be habituated to human disturbances to some degree. The minor increases in noise would not be expected to significantly affect terrestrial wildlife species. Overflights by T-54A aircraft outside of the airfields along flight paths would not be expected to affect any terrestrial wildlife species, as there would be negligible noise and visual stimuli due to the aircraft operating at several thousand feet in altitude and no strike risk.

Alternative 1 would recapitalize or demolish buildings that may contain active bird nests within the buildings or on the rooftop. Building recapitalization or demolition work and tree removal (if any) would, to the extent feasible, take place outside of the breeding season. If this work must be conducted during the bird breeding season, a qualified biologist must confirm that no active nest would be impacted by these actions. With implementation of these measures, construction activities associated with Alternative 1 would avoid or minimize incidental takes of birds protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) (including Birds of Conservation Concern) or their active nests. The Navy has determined that Alternative 1 may result in the incidental “take” of native birds protected by the MBTA by operation of the T-54A aircraft. Under the MBTA’s regulations that are applicable to military readiness activities (50 CFR part 21), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has promulgated a rule that authorizes the incidental take of MBTA-listed birds, provided they do not result in significant adverse effects on their population. Alternative 1 is not expected to result in any adverse impacts on any bird species populations covered under the MBTA with current standard operating procedures (Bird/Animal Aircraft Strike Hazard [BASH] Reduction Plan).

The term “take,” as defined by the USFWS for Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, means to “pursue, shoot, shoot at, poison, wound, kill, trap, capture, trap, collect, molest or disturb.” Although there is no exemption for military readiness activities from the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, a prohibited “take” is unlikely due to:

- Lack of previous takes of eagles by historical operation of T-44C aircraft
- Implementation of the BASH Plan at NAS Corpus Christi and NOLF Cabaniss
- Implementation of Wildlife Hazard Management Plans for the international, regional, and publicly owned municipal airfields
- The absence of eagle nests in the vicinity of the Navy and training airfields.

Alternative 1 may affect but is not likely to adversely affect the northern aplomado falcon, piping plover, red knot, eastern black rail, whooping crane, and tricolored bat. For all other federally listed species identified with potential to occur within the region of influence, the Navy has determined that there would be no effect. The USFWS concurred with the Navy’s determination in a letter dated August 2, 2023. The following measures were agreed upon to prevent or minimize potential adverse effects to the northern aplomado falcon and whooping crane species to the extent practicable:

- Northern aplomado falcon. Low-level aircraft routes (less than 500 feet above ground level) should avoid northern aplomado falcon nesting platforms and territories on Mustang and Matagorda Islands by at least 1 mile to reduce potential noise and human disturbance effects. Maintaining a distance of 1,500 feet above ground level is preferable.
- Whooping crane. Whooping cranes are not expected in the project area. Report sightings of whooping cranes to the Texas Coastal Ecological Services Field Office in Corpus Christi at 361-533-6765.

Cultural Resources: No adverse effects would occur to the Warehouse/Industrial Historic District and the Seaplane Hangars/Ramps Historic District from recapitalization or demolition. Adverse effects to the Landplane Hangars Historic District would occur from building recapitalization or demolition. The adverse effects would be resolved through consultation with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and development of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). The Navy consulted with the Texas SHPO, developed a MOA, and the Navy and the SHPO signed the MOA on August 21, 2023.

Air Quality: No significant impacts to air quality would occur. The six counties where Navy and non-Navy airfield operations would occur are in attainment of the National Ambient Air Quality Standards and, thus, General Conformity does not apply. Emissions of criteria pollutants and greenhouse gases above the No Action Alternative would occur from the construction projects and the planned 10 percent increase in operations of the T-54A. However, the increases would be minor relative to each county's overall emissions and would not result in significant impacts to air quality.

The Navy also prepared and submitted a Coastal Consistency Determination to the Texas General Land Office, which manages the Texas Coastal Management Program and they concurred with the Navy's determination in a letter dated July 28, 2023.

Mitigation Measures: To minimize impacts on breeding birds, the Navy will conduct, to the maximum extent feasible, demolition outside of bird breeding season. If this is not possible, the Navy will have a qualified biologist to conduct a nest survey of the buildings to be demolished within 72 hours of beginning work. If an active nest is found, work will be halted, and the NAS Corpus Christi Wildlife Biologist will be notified to determine the best course of action. These measures will prevent impacts to active nests.

The Navy and the SHPO signed a MOA to resolve an adverse effect to the Landplane Hangars Historic District from building recapitalization or demolition. The Navy will abide by the stipulations presented in the agreement. Stipulations contained in the MOA for Hangars 57 and 58 include that the Navy will conduct the following:

- Notify the SHPO when program funding is received and a final decision is made on demolishing or recapitalizing.

- Coordinate the salvage and removal of select structural elements for potential use in extant World War II hangars at NAS Corpus Christi or other installations in the southeastern area of responsibility.
- Locate and curate original as-built drawings.
- Locate and convey historic photographs to the SHPO.
- Undertake digital photographic documentation and subject to review by the SHPO.
- Provide the history in text and photographs on the NAS Corpus Christi public website.
- Erect a commemorative sign(s) in the Landplane Hangars Historic District that depicts the roles of the hangars in the World War II mission.

Public Outreach: The Navy prepared a Draft EA to inform the public of the Proposed Action and to allow the opportunity for public review and comment. The Navy published a Notice of Availability of the Draft EA for three days in the *Corpus Christi Caller Times* on June 16, 18, and 19, 2023, and once in the weekly *The Island Moon Newspaper* on June 16, 2023. The notice described the Proposed Action, solicited public comments, provided the dates of the public comment period, and announced locations of where the EA would be available for review including libraries and on the project website: <https://www.nepa.navy.mil/mets/>. Agency comments were considered in preparing the Final EA.

Finding: Based on the analysis presented in the EA, which has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of NEPA and Navy policies and procedures (32 CFR Part 775), and in coordination with the USFWS; Texas Parks and Wildlife Department; Texas Historical Commission, SHPO and Texas General Land Office, Coastal Management Program, the Navy finds that implementation of Alternative 1 will not significantly impact the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared.

The EA prepared by the Navy is on file, and interested parties may obtain a copy by downloading the EA from the project website: <https://www.nepa.navy.mil/mets/>.

Date

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 and Deputy Chief of Staff