Office of the Mayor

Municipality of Tinian and Aguiguan

Edwin P. Aldan
Mayor

MOT19-04-057

April 17, 2019

Naval Facilities Engineering Command, Pacific
Attention: MITT Supplemental EIS Project Manager
258 Makapala Drive, Suite 100
Pearl Harbor, HI 96860-3134

RE: MITT Supplemental EIS/OEIS

To Whom It May Concern:

I submit these comments on behalf of the people Tinian and Aguiguan, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). I want to also thank the Navy for extending the scoping period so that the community can have additional time to review the Supplemental EIS.

First, I want to reiterate our position that the MITT and the CNMI Joint Military Training (CJMT) EIS are all part of one concerted effort to expand military training activities in Guam and the CNMI as a result of the Marine's Asia Pacific Realignment. As such, the environmental impacts of the MITT and the CJMT should be analyzed under one EIS to determine the true cumulative impacts that these proposed activities will have on the land, air, sea and the people of the Commonwealth.

We take this opportunity to reiterate our concerns regarding the expansiveness and the nature of the proposed activities' impacts on the overall balance of the marine eco-system which surround the CNMI. Specifically, the impacts on not only the species within the MITT Study Area listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) such as the hammerhead shark, the oceanic whitetip shark and the giant manta ray, but the overall supply of fish stock in the Commonwealth water. The 2019 Supplemental EIS (hereinafter SEIS) indicates that the species of concern do not have substantive protections under the SEIS and states that the species listed are "declining because of the impacts from fishing and habitat degradation."[i] However, there is no study cited to which speaks to how long-term exposure to these types of activities will impact the survivability of species already identified as either threatened or species of concern.

The study has included an extensive listing of federally managed fish species within the study area to include bottom fish, reef fish, and pelagic fish.[1] The SEIS points to modifications to the

[1] EIS pg 3.9-7 - 11

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quantify and type of acoustic and explosive stressors under the proposed alternatives.[2] The studies cited to demonstrate the potential impact to fish, specifically catfish, herring and rainbow trout, and those kept in a fish tank.[3] We find these studies to be insufficient to give a real indication as to how the nature of these activities will impact the fish species within the study area. For example, it is unclear how the study can conclude that sonar signals would result only in the limited probability of a masking effect when the SEIS cites the *ANSI Sound Exposure Guideline* technical report which states that data is lacking to support a clear statement of impact. What is clear in the SEIS is that it should be anticipated that fish will experience hearing loss,[4] masking,[5] physiological stress,[6] and behavioral reactions[7] on levels that cannot be qualitatively quantified raising serious concerns of the long-term cumulative impact on the fish stock within the study area.

Besides sonar testing, the proposed activities include the use of explosives both in the water or near the surface water. The SEIS anticipates a ten percent mortality rate from in-water explosion for fishes with a swim bladder.[8] The SEIS states that there have been few studies of the impact of underwater explosives on early life stages of fish[9] and that explosive energy poses the greatest potential threat for injury and mortality in marine fishes.[10] The study cites that there are no direct measurements as to hearing loss, limited research in masking effects, physiological stress, and behavioral reactions[11] but generally concludes that there would be no significant or negligible impact on the population. Moreover, the SEIS suggest that the implementation of mitigation to avoid potential impacts on ESA species[12] and the fact that most scheduled training and testing activities would occur more than 3NM from shore will help avoid potential impacts on fishes that shelter and feed on the reefs.[13]

Given what the SEIS states that there is limited available qualitative data on the long-term impacts of the nature of these activities, it is unclear how it can be stated that there would be no significant cumulative impact or if there are impacts, due to the above-mentioned stressors, such impacts would be negligible. The assumption that by conducting an activity 3NM from shore assumes that these activities are conducted in an environment similar to that of an aquarium where the flow of sediments, acoustic stressors, metals and other foreign debris such as parachutes that will sink down to the ocean floor, will be contained within a certain area. The facts and logic simply do not support this supposition.

The point is, we the people of Tinian heavily rely on the waters both near shore and off shore, not only to feed our families but for economic self-sustainability. The MITT training areas are

[2] EIS pg 3.9-12
[3] EIS pg 3.9. 15-17
[4] EIS pg 3.9.17
[5] EIS pg 3.9.20-21
[6] EIS pg 3.9.22
[7] EIS pg 3.9-23-27
[8] EIS pg 3.9-41
[9] EIS pg 3.9-43
[10] EIS pg 3.9-43
[11] EIS pg 3.9-43-44
[12] EIS pg 3.9-50
[13] EIS pg 3.9-51

critical to our food security and economic self-sustainability. Although the SEIS provides additional information on the nature of the impact that these activities will have on the fish, the general conclusions drawn with regards to the cumulative impacts are not supported by the narrative which generally states that there is currently not enough study or information that is available to sustain the claim that there will be no adverse impact or that if there are impacts, they will be negligible.

I want to also reiterate the concerns which have previously been expressed by the Municipality with regards to underwater testing activities using sonars and explosives as it relates to marine mammals. A recent article published in the Pacific Daily News reported a beaked whale off the waters of Agat on Jan 17, 2019. The whale's stranding coincided with the Navy's anti-submarine warfare training. According to the same article, the first documented incident of a beaked whale washing ashore in Micronesia was in the Marshall Islands in 1975. The next stranding was not until 2007 in Piti, 35 years later. And just within these last 10 years whale stranding went from 1 in 35 years, to 6 in 10 years which some has linked to the increase in military activities in our oceans. In the Canary Islands, where it used to be a hotspot for mass stranding, there have been no mass stranding since a ban on sonar was imposed by the Spanish government.[14]

What is becoming evident is that stranding has increased with the increase of military training activities in our waters. As previously submitted, the *Cetacean Monitoring in the Marianas Range Complex, 2016*[15] confirms a total of 42 cetacean groups in our waters. While the report indicates that "it is not yet possible to determine how many animals may be impacted by explosive or sonar exercises in the region annually and we are unable to make any evaluation of exposure to cetacean species,"[16] reports from different parts of the world indicate a direct correlation between stranding and sonar testing. Given the increased number of stranding just in Guam coinciding with increased military testing and training activities in the Marianas, there are serious concerns as to the long-term cumulative impact on the overall health mammals and of the marine eco-system.

It is the Municipality's understanding that the reason for the supplemental study of the 2015 MITT EIS/OEIS is to update the 2015 analysis to provide "revised acoustic effects criteria and updated species densities" and to provide "new scientific research," and that the proposed activities within the MITT Study Area include the use of active sonar and explosives of the coast of Guam and the CNMI throughout the in-water areas around the MIRC, the transit corridor between the MIRC and the Hawaii Range Complex. In the 2015 MITT EIS/OEIS, the Navy states that its primary purpose was to comply with the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) and the Endangered Species Act.

However, in reviewing the SEIS, there are concerns of new or increased activities on Tinian. While the SEIS states that the Navy is not "proposing any changes to those land-based activities on Guam, Saipan, Tinian, and Rota, the Navy will continue to rely on the 2015 MITT Final EIS," Table 2.5-1 indicates of potential location of new or increased training activities which includes the possibility of these new or increased activities on Saipan, Tinian, or Rota. The table indicates

[14] https://www.nature.com/articles/497317d

[15] *Hill et al. 2017 Cetacian Monitoring in MIRC Feb 2017.*

[16] *Id* at 13.

increases in amphibious assault trainings on Tinian, increases in personnel insertion/extractions on Tinian and Rota, increases in parachute insertion trainings on Tinian and Rota; and new intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance trainings on Saipan, Tinian, and Rota. Per Tables 2.5-1 and 2.5-2, several new or increased training or testing activities, are designated to take place at "Mariana Littorals," "Mariana Island Anchorages," or simply in the Study Area or the MIRC without further specification.

The Municipality did not anticipate having to be consider the implications of additional trainings in light of other ongoing proposals by DOD under this SEIS. Moreover, the fact that the new and or increased training activities are just slithered into this SEIS without specifying what or where these new trainings are, other that they are within the Study Area or the MIRC, without any public input is disconcerting and we are therefore requesting additional information and further specification.

Sincerely,

Edwin P. Aldan
Mayor of Tinian & Aguiguan