



DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY
PROGRAM EXECUTIVE OFFICE SHIPS
1333 ISAAC HULL AVENUE SE
WASHINGTON NAVY YARD, DC 20376-2101

IN REPLY REFER TO

5400

Ser Ships/172

08 Oct 25

MEMORANDUM

Subj: FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI) FOR PMS 317:
UNDERWAY TOWING, BOW RAMP, AND ANCHOR DEMONSTRATIONS FOR
LANDING CRAFT UTILITY VESSELS IN ALABAMA

Ref: (a) Amphibious Assault and Connectors Program (PMS 317) ltr 30 Sep 25

1. Per reference (a), assessment findings and proposed action approved.

Introduction

Pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA, 42 U.S.C. § 4321 et seq.) and applicable federal NEPA implementing regulations in place at the time the Environmental Assessment (EA) was initiated, the Naval Sea Systems Command Amphibious Assault and Connector's Program Office's Landing Craft Utility Program (PMS 317, hereafter "the Navy") gives notice that an EA has been prepared and an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required for PMS 317: Underway Towing, Bow Ramp, and Anchor Demonstrations for Landing Craft Utility Vessels (LCUs) in Alabama. This action will be implemented as set out in the Proposed Action.

Description of the Proposed Action

The Proposed Action is to conduct underway towing, bow ramp, and anchor demonstrations of the approximately 12 LCU 1700 class vessels (herein referred to as LCUs) within Mobile Bay, Alabama and in nearshore waters off the Gulf coast of Alabama. The Proposed Action includes confirmation of the design of each new LCU vessel and evaluates performance for installed equipment and systems in accordance with the U.S. Navy's Board of Inspection and Survey, Navy vessel inspection and certification requirements. Specific testing would be conducted by the builder (Austal USA, LLC, herein referred to as Austal) before delivery to the Navy and includes the following: (1) underway towing demonstrations, (2) bow ramp demonstrations, and (3) anchor demonstrations. Each demonstration is specific testing conducted to validate/demonstrate the vessel design is in accordance with contract specifications and can meet mission requirements. The Proposed Action would include bow ramp demonstrations at either Alabama State Docks Theodore Terminal (hereafter referred to as Theodore Terminal) or Gulf Shores State Park (hereafter referred to as Gulf Shores) amphibious landing locations.

Each LCU measures 139 ft (42.4 m) in length, has a crew of 14, a draft of 6.8 ft (2.1 m), and is designed to provide for the rapid buildup of combat power ashore by transporting vehicles, cargo, equipment, and troops to the shore, along the shore, and from the shore back to amphibious warships. The LCU is a heavy lift displacement craft capable of independent transits to support and sustain operations from the sea. Capabilities of the LCU would include carrying a 170 short ton (154 metric ton) payload at a maximum speed of 11 knots. Each LCU is propelled by two Caterpillar main propulsion diesel engines, with two generator diesel engines providing electrical power. Additionally, the LCU has a bow ramp and stern gate for onload/offload from the sea to the shore.

Underway towing, bow ramp, and anchor demonstrations for the LCU are anticipated to commence in summer/fall 2025. LCU testing would be short in duration. Exact delivery time of the craft is not set, but

it is anticipated that approximately two LCUs may be tested per year. The Proposed Action may occur year-round as testing for each vessel occurs when construction is completed. Once operational requirements for the first LCUs are confirmed, the other vessels would be constructed and tested the same way. Details of each demonstration are provided below.

Underway towing demonstrations would require the LCU to tow another vessel of similar size for at least 15 minutes within the proposed action area. The LCU would also be towed by another vessel of a similar size for at least 15 minutes. The minimum speed utilized during this demonstration would be that sufficient to maintain steerage while towing. The maximum speed would be less than 10 knots. The underway towing demonstrations would occur once per LCU.

The LCU would demonstrate operation of the bow ramp in open water and on a beach (amphibious). For the open water test, the LCU would be stationary, open the ramp to its lowest position, and then return the ramp to the stowed position. The LCU would conduct amphibious landing testing¹ at either Theodore Terminal or Gulf Shores. Depending on the tides, the LCU would land no further inshore than the foreshore of the beach. The LCU would approach the unoccupied shore at a speed of approximately 10 knots, dropping an anchor off the shore to maintain stability of the craft while on the beach, and aid the vessel in retraction from the beach by maintaining stern stability. The anchor would be dropped perpendicular to the shore with up to 600 ft (183 m) of anchor wire rope paid out. Upon landing on the beach, the vessel would lower the bow ramp in a controlled manner near or on the shore in waters no deeper than 4 ft (1.2 m). The vessel would maintain constant tension in the anchor cable, to prevent the vessel from broaching due to wave action. Once the bow ramp demonstration has been completed, the vessel would raise the bow ramp and take strain on the anchor to retract off the shore. If necessary, propulsion may aid this process. The bow ramp demonstration/landing would take place five times to ensure operability. Each shoreside bow ramp demonstration would not last more than five hours.

Before and during bow ramp demonstrations up to 15 personnel (safety observers, test directors, and Navy supervisor witnesses) would be on the beach at the amphibious landing locations to ensure the landing locations are clear, safe, and to witness the demonstrations. Personnel may also use up to four marking flags to establish a landing zone for the test. These flags would be planted on the beach at an approximate depth of 1 ft (3.3 m). There would be no offloading of personnel or equipment if testing is successful. In the event of an unsatisfactory demonstration personnel may disembark if determined reasonably safe and necessary to resolve the unsatisfactory event.

Standalone anchor testing may also occur during which the LCU would pay out the entire length of anchor line (no more than 900 ft) at 600 feet per minute to demonstrate satisfactory operation of payout device. Once complete, the anchor line would be hauled in at an average speed of at least 300 feet per minute. The maximum speed for anchor testing would be less than 10 knots. The full anchor demonstration process would take no more than 1.5 hours to complete. The anchor demonstrations would occur once per LCU.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to demonstrate that, as built, each LCU 1700 vessel meets the requirements of the contract specification by evaluating the performance of all installed equipment and systems. This includes a series of tests and at-sea demonstrations conducted by Austal to prepare each vessel for final presentation to the Navy and the Navy's Board of Inspection and Survey.

The need for the Proposed Action is to ensure each new LCU vessel was built in accordance with contract specifications and can meet mission requirements. The Navy is developing the replacement class for the existing fleet of LCU vessels, which are past their planned design service life. LCU vessels make rapid

¹ Testing is required to ensure the LCU can land on a beach that has a 1:40 or steeper bank slope of sand, gravel, or pebbles while carrying a load of up to 170 short tons, where 1:40 is the slope ratio of the beach, (e.g., for every 40 feet along the bottom slope, height increases 1 foot).

buildup of forces ashore possible by moving troops, vehicles, cargo, and equipment to the shore, along the shore, and back to the amphibious warship. LCUs may also be used to support civilian, humanitarian, and maritime operations. Vessels with these capabilities are necessary for training and equipping combat-capable naval forces for worldwide deployment. In this regard, the Proposed Action furthers the Navy's execution of its congressionally mandated roles and responsibilities under 10 United States Code (U.S.C.) section 8062.

Alternatives

Potential alternatives that meet the purpose and need were evaluated against the following screening factors:

- Proximity to the Austal facility in Mobile, Alabama for the following reasons: to allow for testing to occur within a single day due to limited berthing on the vessel; in case of vessel failure during underway towing, bow ramp, and anchor demonstrations; and to reduce unnecessary travel to and from testing sites;
- Access to in-water areas for conducting underway towing and anchor demonstrations and shore areas for bow ramp demonstrations; and
- A beaching location that has a 1:40 or steeper bank slope of sand, gravel, or pebbles for the bow ramp demonstration.

Based on the reasonable alternative screening factors and meeting the purpose and need for the Proposed Action, two action alternatives and a No Action Alternative were identified and analyzed along with the Proposed Action.

Under the **No Action Alternative**, the Proposed Action would not occur within Mobile Bay, Alabama, or in nearshore waters off the Gulf coast of Alabama. The No Action Alternative would not meet the purpose and need for the Proposed Action; however, as required by NEPA, the No Action Alternative was carried forward for analysis and provides a baseline for measuring the environmental consequences of the action alternatives.

Under **Alternative 1**, the Navy would conduct underway towing and anchor demonstrations in the proposed action area, including the Mobile Bay and in nearshore waters off the Gulf coast of Alabama. Alternative 1 would include bow ramp demonstrations only at Theodore Terminal. No activities would occur at the Gulf Shores amphibious landing location.

Under **Alternative 2**, the Navy would conduct underway towing and anchor demonstrations in the proposed action area, including the Mobile Bay and in the nearshore waters off the Gulf coast of Alabama. Under this alternative, bow ramp demonstrations would only occur at Gulf Shores. No activities would occur at the Theodore Terminal amphibious landing location.

Environmental Impacts of the Proposed Action

The EA evaluated the Proposed Action in terms of stressors and their potential to impact physical, biological, and socioeconomic resources. Stressors associated with the Proposed Action that were analyzed include vessel noise, vessel movement, and bottom and beach disturbance. These stressors were analyzed for potential impacts to the following resources: benthic sediment, aquatic vegetation, invertebrates, birds, fish, essential fish habitat, sea turtles, marine mammals, commercial and recreational fishing, recreational boating, and commercial shipping.

As described in the EA, implementation of the Proposed Action would result in no significant impacts to the physical, biological, and socioeconomic environments.

Standard Operating Procedures and Protective Measures

- While on watch, personnel shall employ visual search techniques, including the use of binoculars, using a scanning method in accordance with the Lookout Training Handbook.
- While in transit, naval vessels shall be alert at all times, use extreme caution, and proceed at a 'safe speed' so that the vessel can take proper and effective action to avoid a collision with any sighted object or disturbance, including any marine mammal or sea turtle, and can be stopped within a distance appropriate to the prevailing circumstances and conditions.
- All bridge watch personnel and lookouts shall successfully complete the Introduction to the U.S. Navy Afloat Environmental Compliance Training Series and the U.S. Navy Marine Species Awareness Training prior to standing watch or serving as a lookout.
- While underway, the LCU shall have one or more lookouts with the most recent navigation safety instruction. These lookouts must be watchstanders fulfilling lookout duties (can be fulfilling all lookout responsibilities, not only marine species mitigation). Lookouts already posted for safety of navigation and man-overboard precautions satisfy this requirement. Immediately prior to getting underway and while underway, the lookout(s) will observe for marine mammals and sea turtles. Visual observations of applicable marine species shall be communicated immediately to the appropriate watch station for information dissemination and appropriate action.
- Vessels will maneuver themselves (which may include reducing speed) to maintain the following distances as mission and circumstances allow:
 - 500 yards (457 m) from whales
 - 200 yards (183 m) from other marine mammals
 - Vicinity of sea turtles
- No further action is necessary if a non-whale marine mammal continues to close after the vessel has made one course and/or speed change (e.g., bow riding dolphins). This mitigation will not be applied if the vessel's safety is threatened or the vessel is restricted in its ability to maneuver (e.g., during towing activities).
- Floating weeds, algal mats, *Sargassum* rafts, clusters of seabirds, and jellyfish are good indicators of sea turtles and marine mammals. Therefore, increased vigilance in watching for sea turtles and marine mammals shall be taken where these are present.
- In-water lines (rope, chain, and cable) shall be stiff, taut, and non-looping. Examples of such lines are heavy metal chains or heavy cables that do not readily loop and tangle. In all instances, no excess line shall be allowed in the water.
- Demonstrations would only occur during daylight hours.

Agency Consultation and Coordination

Endangered Species Act: The Navy consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) for their applicable species regarding the Proposed Action's compliance with the ESA. On January 25, 2025, USFWS issued concurrence on the Navy's conclusions in the ESA section 7 informal consultation submitted through the Information for Planning and Consultation tool. On April 22, 2025, NMFS concurred with the Navy's conclusions in the ESA expedited informal section 7 consultation.

Coastal Zone Management Act: The Navy submitted a negative determination to the state of Alabama. The state of Alabama concurred with the negative determination January 27, 2025.

Area Environmental Coordinator/ Regional Environmental Coordinator: Coordination with the Regional Environmental Coordinator (NAVFAC South East) and the Area Environmental Coordinator (United

States Fleet Forces) was completed for review and comment on the EA. The REC and AEC signed the technical sufficiency memo August 2025.

Finding

Based on the analysis presented in the EA, which has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of NEPA and applicable federal implementing regulations in place at the time of the EA's initiation, and in coordination with *Alabama Dept. Of Environmental Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and National Marine Fisheries Service*, the Navy finds that implementation of the Proposed Action will not significantly impact the quality of the human environment. Therefore, an EIS will not be prepared. Copies of the EA, including this FONSI, can be obtained from Mr. Douglas Johnson, Naval Sea Systems Command Amphibious Warfare Program Office (PMS317), 1333 Isaac Hull Ave SE, Washington Navy Yard, DC 20376.

7 OCT 2025
Date


RDML B. Metcalf
Department of the Navy
Program Executive Officer, Ships