

**RECORD OF DECISION
FOR THE
REALISTIC BOMBER TRAINING INITIATIVE**

An Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was prepared to aid in determining whether to establish the Realistic Bomber Training Initiative (RBTI). The purpose of RBTI is to:

- (1) Permit aircrews from Barksdale and Dyess Air Force Bases to train for their various missions while maximizing combat training time;
- (2) Provide the type and linked arrangement of airspace and other assets that support realistic training for bomber aircrews, and
- (3) Ensure that flexibility and variability in training supports bomber combat missions.

RBTI will fulfill this purpose by establishing a set of linked training assets comprising an Electronic Scoring Site system that will provide realistic bomber training close enough to Barksdale and Dyess AFBs to effectively use limited flying hours. These assets would be located within approximately 600 nautical miles of Barksdale and Dyess AFBs and would involve:

- (1) A Military Training Route (MTR) that offers variable terrain for use in terrain following and terrain avoidance, overlies lands capable of supporting electronic threat emitters and electronic scoring sites, permits flights down to 300 feet above ground level (AGL) in some segments, and links to a Military Operations Area (MOA).
- (2) A MOA measuring at least 40 by 80 nautical miles with a floor of 3,000 feet AGL and extending to 18,000 feet above mean sea level (MSL) used for avoiding simulated threats and simulated attacks.
- (3) An Air Traffic Control Assigned Area (ATCAA) above the MOA at 18,000 to 40,000 feet MSL to be used for high-altitude training.
- (4) Establishing, through lease or purchase, a set of five locations (15 acres each) under or near the MTR corridor, and an additional five locations (15 acres each) under or near the MOA, for placing electronic threat emitters that would simulate the variety of realistic threats expected in combat.
- (5) Constructing two Electronic Scoring Sites co-located with operations and maintenance centers, one under or near the MTR corridor and the other en route from the bases to the MTR and MOA on leased, purchased, or AF-owned property.
- (6) Decommissioning two existing Electronic Scoring Sites in Harrison, Arkansas and La Junta, Colorado that do not fulfill the B-1 and B-52 training requirements. These sites do not provide the required training assets outlined above in items 1, 2 and 3.

ALTERNATIVES ANALYZED

Four alternatives were analyzed, a no-action alternative (Alternative A), and three action alternatives, Alternatives B, C and D. All three action alternatives fulfill the need defined

under the proposed action. Alternative B: IR-178/Lancer MOA and Alternative C: IR-178/Texon MOA are almost entirely in western Texas. Only a small portion of airspace in these alternatives extends into New Mexico. Alternative D: IR-153/Mt. Dora MOA is located primarily in northeastern New Mexico with portions of the MTR extending into northwestern Texas. All three action alternatives predominantly coincide with existing MTR or MOA airspace; little area not currently exposed to overflights would be affected. Under Alternative A: No-Action, the Air Force would continue using existing assets and airspace would remain unchanged. All three action alternatives meet operational goals defined for RBTI. Based on the analysis presented in the EIS, agency input, and public comments, the Air Force believes Alternative B is preferable to Alternatives A, C and D. Alternative B meets all operational requirements with less potential for adverse environmental impacts than Alternative C and significantly less than Alternative D. Therefore, Alternative B is the Air Force's environmentally and operationally preferred alternative.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The public involvement process followed by the Air Force for RBTI included:

- (1) Community meetings prior to issuing a Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare the RBTI Environmental Impact Statement (EIS);
- (2) Scoping comment period and meetings;
- (3) Intergovernmental /Interagency Coordination for Environmental Planning (IICEP) and Agency consultation; and
- (4) Public comment period and hearings.

Efforts for early public involvement began in December 1997. These efforts consisted of six informal community meetings in Texas and New Mexico to gain input on the RBTI alternative identification process. Input from the community meetings helped shape the alternatives.

Official notification of the Air Force RBTI proposal began with publication of the NOI in the Federal Register on December 19, 1997. In late January and early February 1998, 11 scoping meetings were held in affected communities in Texas, New Mexico, Colorado and Arkansas. This started the scoping period during which the Air Force solicited comments from the public, interest groups and agencies to help define the scope of analysis for the EIS and to aid in identification of additional alternatives. All comments and letters were considered and used to help develop the scope for the analysis for the draft EIS. The scoping period lasted through April 3, 1998, including a 45 day extension. Public involvement continued in April 1998 (following the formal scoping period), when Air Force representatives were invited to participate in two community meetings held in Taos and Angel Fire, New Mexico.

As part of Government-to-Government consultation for RBTI, 32 tribes and/or tribal-affiliated organizations that historically resided in the affected area were notified. At their request, ongoing discussions and consultations have continued throughout the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process with the Jicarilla Apache Tribe and the Taos Pueblo in New Mexico.

Through the IICEP process, appropriate federal, state and local agencies were notified of the proposed action. In total, over 100 IICEP letters were sent to agencies and officials. Comments from these agencies and officials were reviewed for incorporation into the environmental analysis. The IICEP process also provided the Air Force an opportunity to seek and obtain data on resources within the jurisdiction of each agency or organization, and to gather relevant information on issues affecting the RBTI proposal. Meetings with several agencies were conducted, including with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USF&WS) as part of consultation for Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) was a cooperating agency for this EIS.

A 45 day public comment period on the draft EIS began with publication of the Notice of Availability (NOA) on March 19, 1999. As with scoping, a 45-day extension was granted, allowing 90 days total for the public comment period. Fifteen meetings were held in 11 locations in Texas, New Mexico, Colorado and Arkansas. All comments were reviewed and considered in development of the final EIS, and this decision.

The Air Force goal is to continuously balance readiness training with the environment and community concerns. This includes actions during the proposal development process, management actions coincident with project start-up, and most importantly, those long-term actions that continuously address community concerns throughout the life of the project.

DECISION

After considering the operational utility and potential environmental consequences of the three RBTI action alternatives and the No-Action Alternative, the Air Force chooses to implement Alternative B, which involves locating the appropriate training assets under IR-178/Lancer MOA. The Air Force will take action required to request FAA implementation of the airspace modifications necessary to implement Alternative B.

IMPACTS

Historically, the affected airspace under RBTI accommodated aircraft overflights, including military flight training activities and civil aviation. Existing airspace will be used to the maximum extent possible for IR-178 and Lancer MOA. Some airspace will be eliminated and new airspace added. Under Alternative B, airspace management will remain similar to that found today. The potential for conflicts with civil aviation will not be significant, although coordinating with civilian aviators involving weather-modification, crop dusting, ranching and other similar management activities will require increased attention and resources from the Air Force. For Alternative B, average daily sortie operations will range from 1 to 10, depending upon the segment of the MTR. Sortie numbers will vary from an increase of 1 to 6 to a decrease of up to 5 per operational day as compared to historic airspace use on given segments.

Noise levels will range from 45 to 61 dB (Average Day-Night Sound Level [DNL]) for Alternative B. There will be an increase in noise of 2 to 13 dB depending on the route/MOA segment examined. Noise analysis indicated an increase in the percentage of people potentially

highly annoyed under RBTI. For Alternative B, the percentage of highly annoyed people could rise to a maximum of 8 percent for portions of IR-178. Under the Lancer MOA, the analysis showed approximately one percent of the people could be highly annoyed.

Effects of aircraft emissions on air quality and the potential for aircraft mishaps will be inconsequential for Alternative B.

Overall, there would be no likely effects to designated land use, recreation or visual resources. Increases in noise levels from aircraft could be perceived by some as affecting their quality of life. However, the analysis revealed no impacts on recreation, property values, or hunting leases. This is evidenced in other MOAs within the region where recreation, property values and hunting leases remain unaffected by aircraft overflights more numerous than those projected for RBTI. Six communities under Alternative B could experience increases in noise levels of 2 to 8 dB. Aircrews, however, will avoid overflights of communities by the standards set forth in FAA regulations.

Field surveys at the emitter and Electronic Scoring Sites for Alternative B did not identify any threatened, endangered or sensitive species. Under Alternative B, increased overflights would occur over estimated historic Aplomado Falcon habitat; however, only 11 sightings have occurred in the region since 1992. The Air Force has consulted with the USF&WS on the Endangered Species Act relative to RBTI. The USF&WS concurs with the Air Force determination that this action is not likely to adversely affect threatened and endangered species.

Construction of the Electronic Scoring Sites in Texas will result in a beneficial socioeconomic impact. Decommissioning of the Electronic Scoring Sites in Harrison, Arkansas and La Junta, Colorado will result in minimal negative socioeconomic impacts. The effects of flying activities are not expected to produce measurable impacts on the economic value of the land since this area has been generally overflowed since the 1940's. Other factors, such as drought, market prices, community amenities, and proximity to urban areas are more likely to affect land values than military aircraft overflights. The environmental justice analysis established that implementation of Alternative B will have no adverse impact.

The Air Force surveyed the proposed emitter and Electronic Scoring Sites for cultural resources that could be affected by construction and ground operations. One archaeological site could be affected under Alternative B. However, impacts to this site could be avoided or mitigated to insignificance through completion of the Section 106 process of the National Historic Preservation Act and employment of a combination of avoidance, monitoring, testing, and data recovery (if needed), or selection of an alternative site. Existing research and consultation with appropriate Native American tribes indicated no identified traditional resources within the affected airspace of Alternative B. Although 15 National Register-listed properties could be overflowed, overflights will occur in areas already subject to military aircraft overflights and aircraft would not create a new visual or audible feature in an otherwise historic or traditional landscape. Noise from aircraft overflights would not reach levels likely to damage structures. Therefore, the effects of visual or audible intrusions or damage from noise or vibrations would be negligible. No National Historic Landmarks are located under Alternative B.

Proper management will be followed to reduce effects of any potential short-term wind and water erosion of surface soils to insignificant levels. Landowners will retain control of any mineral or water rights. No long-term impacts to water resources will occur as a result of construction or use of the Electronic Scoring Sites or emitters.

There would be no cumulative impacts from the interaction of RBTI Alternative B with other past, present or reasonably foreseeable actions.

MITIGATION MEASURES

The mitigation measures presented below reflect specific actions the Air Force will take to reduce the potential for particular effects to resources, as identified in the EIS.

- (1) The Air Force will reduce potential impact (as identified by USF&WS) to Aplomado Falcon habitat by:
 - (a) Evaluating the areas under IR 178 that are not currently being surveyed.
 - (b) Expanding the ongoing Aplomado Falcon survey into areas the evaluation determines may be Aplomado Falcon habitat.

- (2) The Air Force will avoid or reduce potential impacts to biological and cultural resources from construction or modification of access roads, power lines, and telephone lines by:
 - (a) Consulting with State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO).
 - (b) Consulting with USF&WS.
 - (c) Surveying rights-of-way for cultural and biological resources.
 - (d) Realigning rights-of-way to avoid resources, where feasible.
 - (e) Developing and implementing site-specific mitigation measures, if required.

- (3) The Air Force will avoid or reduce potential impacts to cultural resources from the decommissioning of the La Junta Electronic Scoring Site, including disposition of lands out of federal ownership, by completion of the National Historic Preservation Act's Section 106 process.

MANAGEMENT ACTIONS

In addition to the mitigation measures described above, two types of management actions are designed to address concerns:

Management Actions incorporated into the proposal: These actions used project design, configuration, and/or component location to reduce or eliminate potential impacts to a resource or suite of resources. Such actions include the use of existing information or data collected as part of the public involvement process to avoid siting alternative components in areas or settings known to contain resources that could be significantly

affected. Such avoidance is not absolute; rather it is balanced with training and operational considerations needed to perform realistic bomber training.

- (1) Citizens expressed concerns about creating new military airspace. The Air Force followed the FAA policy of using existing airspace to the maximum extent possible. This proposal used 85% existing airspace by:
 - (a) Linking segments of existing MTRs to form a complete MTR, IR 178.
 - (b) Linking portions of three existing MOAs to form a complete MOA, the Lancer MOA.
- (2) Concerns were expressed about the structure of the proposed MTR, IR 178. The Air Force reduced noise related to individual overflights and associated effects by raising the floor of several segments of the proposed IR 178.
- (3) Agencies expressed concerns that flexibility was needed in the number and siting of emitter sites and Electronic Scoring Sites to address potential environmental impacts. The Air Force provided flexibility and minimized impact by:
 - (a) Considering more sites than would be required for the Electronic Scoring Sites and emitter sites.
 - (b) Eliminating many candidate sites that contained known historical sites, or were located too close to homes, large structures, and obvious bodies of water.
- (4) The public expressed concerns with potential environmental consequences due to site and infrastructure construction associated with emitter sites and Electronic Scoring Sites. The Air Force minimized impact by:
 - (a) Selecting candidate sites as close as possible to existing roads, as well as power and telephone lines so that less area would be affected by construction.
 - (b) Choosing previously disturbed areas, where feasible.
 - (c) Conducting surveys to locate sensitive cultural or biological resources to avoid or minimize disturbance.
- (5) Citizens expressed concerns about exposing the public to radio frequency energy from emitters. The Air Force minimized risk and ensured public safety by using sites that contain an 800 X 800 foot fenced area that provides 150 feet of extra safe-separation distance.
- (6) Concerns were expressed that construction and maintenance of emitter sites and Electronic Scoring Sites could increase erosion and therefore affect soils and water resources. The Air Force will minimize impacts, preserve wetlands and drainages, and reduce erosion by specifying best management practices and selecting sites that avoid wetlands, drainages, and areas with sloped terrain.

- (7) The public and agencies expressed concerns regarding the altitude of the MOA floor. The Air Force will provide additional separation between military operations and civil aviation by establishing the floor of the MOA above the Instrument Approach Procedures minimum altitudes for all airports under or adjacent to the Lancer MOA.

Management Actions to address community/agency concerns: These actions were developed to address concerns voiced by the public and agencies. These concerns were received through oral and written comments during the public comment period.

- (1) Citizens expressed concerns about the increased number of flights proposed for IR 178. The Air Force will reduce the impact of individual low-altitude-flights, compared to projections in the EIS, by limiting the annual sortie-operations to 1,560 (about 6 per day), instead of the proposed 2,600 (about 10 per day).
- (2) The public expressed concerns that the floor of some segments of the proposed IR 178 were proposed to be lower (200 feet AGL) than the minimum flight altitude of 300 feet AGL. The Air Force will institute IR 178 segment altitudes that correspond with minimum flight altitudes by raising the floor of all segments of IR 178 to a minimum of 300 feet AGL.
- (3) Agencies and the public expressed concerns about the interaction between military use of the Lancer MOA and underlying airport traffic. They also indicated concern about the interaction between military use of IR 178 and the Lancer MOA with general aviation activities in the region. The Air Force will increase communication opportunities with civil aviators by establishing a 1-800 telephone number to Dyess AFB for airspace schedule information. Additionally, the Air Force will allow easier access to local airports, raise awareness and avoid potential conflicts between military and general aviation aircraft flying in local airspace by establishing a Military Radar Unit (MRU) and real-time communications. The MRU will be operational concurrently and co-located with the en route Electronic Scoring Site, and will become a critical part of the long-term actions that continuously address community concerns.
- (4) The public expressed concerns about conflicts between military flights and local aviation in the vicinity of the proposed re-entry route on IR 178. The Air Force will reduce the potential for conflicts by raising the floor of the IR 178 re-entry route to 6,000 feet MSL.
- (5) Concerns were expressed that there could be an increase in noise complaints and some citizens indicated that noise complaints are not handled effectively. The Air Force will provide improved communication opportunities between the public and the Dyess AFB Public Affairs Office by publicizing an existing 1-800 telephone number, and encouraging citizens to contact the base with concerns or complaints.

- (6) The public and agencies expressed concern about the potential adverse effect on known cultural resources associated with locating the en route Electronic Scoring Site near Dyess AFB. The Air Force will continue to develop and examine ways to minimize these potential effects to include the possibility of locating the en route Electronic Scoring Site on an evaluated candidate site under the Lancer MOA, at a local municipal airport, or other suitable location. In the event this management action leads to a substantive change, the Air Force will undertake any additional environmental analysis required by this change. Additionally, aircraft overflights will be limited to 5,000 AGL or higher when within 3 nautical miles of the en route Electronic Scoring Site.
- (7) Although not addressed in the EIS, the Air Force will also implement the following initiatives to further enhance public involvement:
 - (a) Designate Dyess AFB as the single point of contact for all noise complaints within the confines of the Lancer MOA.
 - (b) Create a web site to provide the public RBTI information.
 - (c) Establish a team to routinely gather public issues and information to address citizen concerns.

SUMMARY

The Air Force will continue to work with the FAA and other federal agencies, state agencies, and local communities during and after the establishment of the Realistic Bomber Training Initiative. This interaction will aid in the reduction of noise impacts on the affected area and form the basis for long-term actions that will continuously address community concerns throughout the life of the project. These actions will help achieve the Air Force goal to continuously balance readiness training with the environment and community concerns.

The EIS used public involvement to identify alternatives and impacts, and assess the environmental consequences associated with the Realistic Bomber Training Initiative. Where feasible, the Air Force developed mitigation measures and management actions to minimize the environmental impact and address the concerns and comments of agencies and the public.



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