

Date: October 17, 2014



Dear Interested Parties:

The Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest (NF), as well as the Olympic and Colville National Forests, have been working cooperatively with the Department of Defense, US Navy (Navy) in determining if the Forest Service will provide special use permits for access to specific Forest roads for the purpose of Navy training exercises across all three Forests. The Navy has identified three sites, on existing roads within the Tonasket Ranger District on the Okanogan-Wenatchee NF, that they propose be used in their training exercises.

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (NEPA)

Environmental impacts were evaluated through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process. The Navy prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA), finalized in the summer of 2014 to determine if an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) would be necessary. It was their determination that an Environmental Impact Statement would not be needed based on level of impact to resources. In their EA, the Navy described their proposed action and alternatives, the purpose, need for action, and potential impacts to the environment by resource.

Navy resource specialists determined that there would be no significant impacts to the resources potentially involved based upon context, intensity, and duration of project effects. Specialists determined that the exercises would have no impact, or would have minimal short-term impacts to vegetation, hydrology, and aquatic and terrestrial species, including Pacific Northwest Sensitive species. It would briefly result in noise above ambient forest levels.

The State Historic Preservation Office has been consulted and agreed that there will be no impacts to cultural resources. The US Fish and Wildlife Service, has concurred, through consultation, there will be no adverse effects from the proposed Navy exercise to federally listed and proposed species and their designated critical habitats.

Because the Navy made a determination that there would be no impact to short-term, negligible impacts to resources of concern, they published a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) explaining the decision and reasoning for the selection of the chosen alternative in the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest.

Although an EA has been published by the Navy, the public and agencies in the affected area of the Tonasket Ranger District of the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest region have not yet had the opportunity to comment about the project or EA. Therefore, to initiate public involvement, the Forest Service is offering a 30-day public comment period. Instructions for commenting are at the end of this letter. We will also hold an open house in the affected area to discuss the NEPA process and the proposed actions of the Navy and the Forest Service. The open house will be held on November 4, 2014, from 3:30 to 7:30 PM, at the Okanogan PUD auditorium.

NAVY PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed training exercises are planned to take place within the assigned airspace of the Okanogan Military Operations Areas (MOA) where aircraft training routinely occurs. Training approval will involve allowing 2 each medium-sized Navy vehicles, which are mounted with electronic emitters and manned by two civilian operators, access to existing Forest roads having adequate open space for the emitters to

communicate directly with Navy aircraft flying overhead above 9,000 feet. The trucks are 1 ½ ton vehicles similar in size to a camper mounted on a pickup truck or a mobile TV communications van. There will be no ground mounted emitters installed.

Three sites within the Tonasket Ranger District have been proposed for the staging of these vehicles: The Mt. Hull site (Site 2) is adjacent to Forest Road 3525 at the helicopter landing created for the Summit Timber Sale, Section 16, T. 39 N., R 28 E., W.M. The Peony Creek site (Site 3) is located at the dispersed camping site adjacent to Forest Road 3010 in Section 29, T. 36 N., R. 29 E., W.M. The Deep Creek site (Site 5) is located near the junctions of Forest Roads 3120020 and 3120060 in Section 13, T. 35 N., R. 31 E., W.M. All sites are located at least one mile from known residences. Snowplowing of roads to access the sites is not presently planned.

Mobile emitters are intended to improve and support aircrew training for aviators from units based at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, WA. This type of training has been conducted on the Olympic Peninsula in a simulated manner with aircraft flying over lands where emitters would be temporarily staged. No weapons of any nature will be used in the exercises. No damage to any Forest resources would occur as the vehicles will be staged on roads, alongside roads, or within pullouts/currently designated disturbed areas. Impacts are anticipated to be comparable to an RV driving along existing Forest roads.

The emitters are at least 14 feet above the ground, put out directional electronic signals that will be pointed skyward and towards the west coast. The mobile units will be staged on ridges or other high locations or open settings and would pose no threat to human or animals on the ground below the emitters. Risk to animals or humans is unlikely due to the directional nature of the signal, as a result there is no risk to the crewmen within the mobile unit.

Emitters output electromagnetic radiation; which is merely a way of saying electronic energy. The emitters use frequencies similar to those used for satellite communications, satellite phones, some WI-FI devices, cordless phones, Bluetooth devices, and weather radar systems. The power output of the emitters is similar to that of the microwave emitters used by television or sporting event vans to broadcast their signals to their parent stations that we regularly see in our communities. Emitters send out a communications or radar signal that overflying aircraft will then detect and process. This allows training in the kind of electronic signals that may be encountered when flying in hostile territory.

To assure maximum safety measures are enforced, the Navy has mandated that crews shut down the emitters if animals or people are within a 100 foot safety zone around the mobile units when the systems are sending out skyward signals. The perimeter would be marked with signage and tape. Crews will not stage in any Forest lands already occupied by members of the public or animals. Crews will monitor the perimeter of the safety zone continuously during operation. Emitters will be turned on and off throughout the course of the training exercises. There will not be continuous operation. Because the Navy wants to assure/ensure the public that humans and animals are at no threat from the emitters they have established the 100 foot perimeter which is 10 times the potential range of emissions from the unit if it were at ground level.

The Navy has identified several needs for the training exercises to be held within Tonasket Ranger District. They include: to provide a more realistic training environment, reduce the cost to the taxpayer, reduce the carbon footprint of aircraft and/or vehicles traveling 400 miles to Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho for similar training, and to support unit certifications and sustainment level training.

Please note that at the time of this letter, the Navy is still in the development and implementation phases of the vehicles and emitters. They have not been constructed yet.

FOREST SERVICE PROPOSED ACTION

The Okanogan-Wenatchee NF is proposing to issue a special use permit to the U.S. Navy, for its proposed training on the Tonasket Ranger District. The term of the permit would be for 5 years. Based upon the Navy decision to proceed forward with Alternative 2 as described in their EA and FONSI, the Forest Service will pick up the NEPA process and engage in public involvement with the interested public and affected agencies. Based upon the determination of the Forest Service's Responsible Official, the Forest Service may issue a Special Use Permit to the Navy for training exercises on existing Forest Roads. This is in agreement with the Memorandum of Understanding that the Department of Agriculture has with the Department of Defense allowing cooperation in permitting military training exercises on Forest Service lands.

SUMMARY

The proposed undertaking by the Navy was analyzed in an Environmental Assessment (EA) called the Pacific Northwest Electronic Warfare Range Project. It was completed in August of 2014 and determined that the level of impact would not warrant the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The proposed action involves the staging of two 1 ½ ton military vehicles mounted with electronic emitters to communicate with overflying navy aircraft in training exercises to prepare aircrews for engagement with adversaries. These vehicles are still in the design and manufacture phases and not operational at this time.

The proposed action for the Forest Service is to issue the Navy a special use permit for a term of 5 years, allowing exercises to proceed as described in their EA for Alternative 2.

After the comment period, the Forest Service will consider any comments received and issue a Draft Decision for this Project. The Draft Decision will be subject to objection pursuant to 36 CFR 218, Subpart A, and the special procedures listed at 36 CFR 218 Subpart B will apply. To be eligible to object, each individual or representative of an organization must submit timely and specific written comments during this 30-day comment period, and must either sign the comments or verify identity upon request.

HOW TO COMMENT

The Forest Service encourages comments from the interested public and affected agencies on this proposed action in written, email, fax, or postal mail forms. The 30-day comment period will be initiated by publication of a Legal Notice of Opportunity to Comment in the Wenatchee World, the newspaper of record for this Project. Public comment was initiated on October 19 and will close on November 17, 2014. Please do not rely upon comment period dates obtained from other sources. It is the responsibility of all individuals and organizations providing comments to submit them by the close of the comment period and to ensure that their comments have been received.

Only those who provide written comments (fax, email, postal mail) during this public comment period are afforded the opportunity to object to the Draft Decision Document when it is published. Issues raised in written objection must be based on issues raised in the initial written comment document.

Comments received regarding the proposed action will be considered and a Decision Notice will be released describing the Forest Service's deciding official's final decision and explanation of reasoning. We recommend email as the most efficient, accurate, and effective means of communicating your comments and/or objections.

Those submitting email comments must place the Project Name in the subject line and either provide the comments in the body of the email or attach a Microsoft Word (.doc), rich text format (.rtf), or Adobe

portable format (.pdf) to the following address: comments-pacificnorthwest-okanogan-tonasket@fs.fed.us. In cases where no identifiable name is attached to a comment, a verification of identity will be required for objection eligibility. If using an electronic message, a scanned signature is one way to provide verification. E-mails submitted to e-mail addresses other than the one listed above, in other formats than those listed, or containing viruses, will not be accepted.

For electronically mailed comments, the sender should normally receive an automated electronic acknowledgement from the agency as confirmation of receipt. If the sender does not receive an automated acknowledgement of the receipt of the comments, it is the sender's responsibility to ensure timely receipt by other means. It is the responsibility of persons providing comments to submit them by the close of the comment period. It is the responsibility of persons providing comments by electronic means to ensure that their comments have been received. Individuals and organizations wishing to be eligible to object must meet the information requirements of 36 CFR 218.

Written comments must be submitted to the Responsible Official, Forest Supervisor Michael L. Balboni, c/o Phil Christy, 1 West Winesap, Tonasket, WA 98855. Hand deliveries must be submitted during normal business hours (7:45 am to 4:30 pm M-F, excluding holidays).

Please be aware that all comments, names, addresses, and phone numbers become part of the project record and are subject to release if a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request is received.

An open house will be held on November 4, 2014 at the Okanogan PUD, in Okanogan, WA from 3:30 to 7:30 PM, to discuss the proposed actions.

FOR INFORMATION

For information only, please contact:

Phillip Christy, Tonasket District Environmental Coordinator, phone (509) 486-5137, fax (509)486-1922. Email pchristy@fs.fed.us , Office hours are 7:45 am to 4:30 pm M-F, excluding holidays.
[Primary Project contact]

Sara J White, Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, Forest Environmental Coordinator, phone (509)-664-9232, Email sarajwhite@fs.fed.us, Office hours are 7:30 am to 4:30 pm M-F

The Navy's Environmental Assessment is located at:

http://www.fs.fed.us/nepa/nepa_project_exp.php?project=45621

The Navy's PA Office can be reached at 360-396-1630.

We thank you for your interest in this Project and appreciate your comments as we continue the Forest Service environmental process.

Sincerely,

MICHAEL L. BALBONI
Forest Supervisor
Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest