

**DECISION NOTICE AND FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT  
FOR INCREASED UTILIZATION AND EXPANSION OF THE  
CLAIBORNE AIR-TO-GROUND WEAPONS RANGE, LOUISIANA**

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**Introduction**

It is my decision to allocate additional land resources, amend the *Revised Land and Resources Management Plan* for the Kisatchie National Forest (KNF), and re-issue a Special Use Permit to the U.S. Air Force (USAF) for use of Claiborne Range, as described in Alternative 1 of the *Environmental Assessment of Increased Utilization and Expansion of the Claiborne Air-to-Ground Weapons Range*. Alternative 1 allows for the greatest protection of the public while still enabling the USAF to conduct operations.

The decision also modifies the *Revised Land and Resources Management Plan*. This non-significant amendment would be the second amendment to the KNF *Revised Land and Resources Management Plan*. Selection of Alternative 1 results in a reclassification of red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) habitat management area. Currently, the area surrounding the Range boundary is classified as Sub-management Area (SMA) 5CL. In the SMA 5CL, the number of RCW cluster sites or recruitment stands to be established or maintained is based on one per 200 acres of pine and pine-hardwood forest. The land within the current Range boundary is classified as SMA 9DL. In the 9DL SMA, the number of RCW cluster sites or recruitment stands to be established or maintained is based on one per 250 acres of pine and pine-hardwood forest. Under Alternative 1, approximately 4,593 acres of SMA 5CL would be converted to 9DL. To offset the potential impacts to the KNF RCW population under Alternative 1 and to maintain the RCW population goal identified in the *Revised Land and Resources Management Plan* for the Evangeline Unit (i.e., 231 active clusters), up to four additional RCW recruitment stands would be established in the area outside the Impact Area. This activity would occur in addition to the 9DL RCW management objectives and in accordance with current 5CL RCW management objectives.

**Background**

The action addressed by the accompanying Environmental Assessment (EA) is the increased utilization and expansion of Claiborne Air-to-Ground Weapons Range managed by the 917 Wing (917 WG) at Barksdale Air Force Base (AFB). Claiborne Range is located within the KNF in north-central Louisiana. As part of the Air Force Reserve Command (AFRC), the 917 WG oversees the activities of the 47th Fighter Squadron (47 FS) and the 93rd Bomb Squadron (93 BS) located at Barksdale AFB, Louisiana. The 47 FS operates and flies the A/OA-10 fighter aircraft and the 93 BS operates and flies the B-52H bomber aircraft. The 917 WG is also responsible for the scheduling, maintenance, and operation of Claiborne Range. Claiborne Range is used by a variety of USAF, AFRC, Navy, and Air National Guard aircraft.

In 1997, AFRC and the 917 WG identified a need for modifying the Special Use Permit for operations at Claiborne Range located in the KNF. The arrival of the B-52 squadron along with new training requirements and weapons would require an increase in the existing range boundary. AFRC is coordinating with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to expand the boundary while ensuring adequate public safety during the training exercises occurring at Claiborne Range.

The Proposed Action has been updated since the public scoping period and the public scoping meetings that were held during the month of October in 1997. Under the 1997 proposal, changes

to both military airspace overlying Claiborne Range and on-the-ground modifications to Claiborne Range were proposed. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) allows for tiered analyses in certain cases. The analyses conducted as part of the original proposal have been tiered. Changes to the special use airspace surrounding Claiborne Range were assessed in a December 2000 EA entitled, *Environmental Assessment Proposed Airspace Actions and Changes at the Claiborne Air-to-Ground Weapons Range Barksdale AFB, Louisiana, Volume I – Proposed Airspace Actions, Affected Environment, Environmental Consequences and Technical Appendices for the Proposed Changes in Special Use Airspace of the 917th Wing and the 548th Combat Training Squadron*. USAF signed the Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) on May 9, 2001. The aforementioned EA, therefore, was incorporated by reference into the accompanying EA. No further discussion of the special use airspace surrounding Claiborne Range is required. The accompanying EA addresses the potential impacts associated with the proposed expansion of Claiborne Range.

The Proposed Action is to increase USAF training capabilities at Claiborne Range by expanding the existing Range boundary through land allocations. In order to accomplish the Proposed Action, USFS would need to re-issue the Special Use Permit and amend the Forest's *Revised Land and Resource Management Plan*. The addition of B-52s to the 917 WG and their requirement to train in reduced threat weapons delivery tactics has altered Claiborne Range's operational support requirements including: B-52 training in reduced threat weapons delivery tactics; the requirement for fighter type aircraft training using the high altitude release bomb delivery tactic; the ability of fighter type aircraft to employ the PGU-27 bullet in ground low angle strafe training; and the ability of fighter type aircraft to employ the 2.75-inch forward firing aerial rocket equipped with the improved MK-66 motor. New weapons and tactics have been developed and training in these procedures is necessary. These new requirements would require an expansion of the existing Range boundary.

#### **Alternatives Considered**

Based on the proposed Composite Weapons Safety Footprint, two alternatives were identified. Under all alternatives, no changes are proposed for the existing Impact Area. All current fence lines around the Impact Area would continue to be maintained in accordance with the current Special Use Permit guidelines.

**Alternative 1.** Under Alternative 1, Claiborne Range would include the existing Impact Area, the existing Safety Fan, the proposed Composite Weapons Safety Footprint, and additional acreage to provide for increased public safety. The total acreage of the Range would increase to approximately 7,800 acres within the KNF. This alternative would amend the KNF *Revised Land and Resources Management Plan*. In an effort to minimize potential adverse impacts to the physical environment of the forest, AFRC would maximize the use of existing roadbeds and streambeds to define the boundaries of the additional area proposed for restricted public access around Claiborne Range. Access to the Range under Alternative 1 would be comprised of both "limited" and "restricted" public access. AFRC proposes to restrict public access on the 672 acres encompassed by the Impact Area. The remaining 7,128 acres would be available for limited public access for at least 90 days per year during the same periods currently scheduled for Claiborne Range.

**Alternative 2.** Under Alternative 2, the proposed Claiborne Range boundary would follow the Minimum Composite Weapons Safety Footprint and the existing Range boundary, and would total approximately 4,800 acres. AFRC proposes to restrict public access on the 672 acres encompassed by the Impact Area. The remaining 4,128 acres would be available for limited

public access for at least 90 days per year during the same periods currently scheduled for Claiborne Range. This alternative would also amend the KNF *Revised Land and Resources Management Plan*.

**No Action Alternative.** The No Action Alternative would result in no alterations to the current Range boundary or training, with all existing conditions remaining in place and continuing "as is." Operations would continue under the current Special Use Permit. No new amendment would be made to the *Revised Land and Resource Management Plan*. The No Action Alternative serves as the benchmark against which Federal actions can be evaluated. Inclusion of the No Action Alternative is prescribed by Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 1502) and, therefore, was carried forward for further analysis in the EA.

**Mitigation.** As a result of increasing the size of Claiborne Range, less land is available for public access. Public access periods have traditionally focused on hunting seasons because that is the period of greatest demand and use. Currently, the public is granted access to 2,535-acre Safety Fan at least 90 days per year. The 90 days are determined by when the Range is scheduled for use. Notices announcing the public access days are posted in various locations. With adoption of Alternative 1, an additional 4,593 acres would become limited to public access. In order to ensure the public's safety, while maintaining adequate public access, USFS and Claiborne Range personnel have developed an Operations and Management Plan. Included in this plan is language to increase the number of days that the public is allowed access to the 7,128-acre limited access area. During periods not scheduled for public access but when USAF has no flying operations scheduled, the limited access area may be made available for public use. Periods of non-use by USAF of three days or longer, or which include weekends, will warrant the limited use area to be opened to the public. Non-scheduled access will be on a daily basis only. No camping will be allowed. Users will be required to check the Range status on the bulletin board each day.

### **Decision**

My decision is to adopt Alternative 1, as described on page 2-10 of the EA. Alternative 1 allows for the greatest protection for the public while allowing AFRC to conduct exercises at Claiborne Range. Under this alternative, the total acreage of the Range will increase to approximately 7,800 acres within the KNF, the Special Use Permit for Claiborne Range operations within the KNF will be re-issued, and USFS will amend the KNF Management Plan to reflect the change in SMA as a result of the Proposed Action (under Alternative 1, all land within the proposed buffer will be reclassified as 9DL).

### **Rational for the Decision**

The purpose of the Proposed Action is to accommodate USAF training requirements associated with the 917 WG and other Department of Defense (DoD) units that utilize Claiborne Range by allocating additional land for intensive military use to increase the training capabilities of the Range. The arrival of a B-52 squadron and the introduction of new weapons systems and events along with changing mission requirements of other DoD units in the area contribute to this proposal to increase the size of Claiborne Range to meet changing aircraft operations.

The Proposed Action is needed to ensure that DoD pilots and aircrews are able to receive comprehensive and realistic tactical flying training to allow these forces to train to the highest standards established by USAF to accomplish its mission. This specific need stems from the larger need to secure the continued fighting efficiency and effectiveness of the U.S. and allied air

forces. In addition, AFRC seeks to ensure that public access to the KNF is not diminished and that the safety of its users is not compromised during the training exercises occurring at Claiborne Range.

Implementing Alternative 1 will allow for the greatest protection for the public while allowing AFRC to conduct exercises at Claiborne Range.

#### **Agency Coordination and Public Involvement**

AFRC coordinated with Federal, state, and local agencies and invited public participation throughout the development of the EA. NEPA requirements help ensure that environmental information is made available to the public during the decision-making process and prior to actions being taken. The Intergovernmental Coordination Act and Executive Order 12372, *Intergovernmental Review of Federal Programs*, require Federal agencies to cooperate with and consider state and local views in implementing a Federal proposal. Air Force Instruction 32-7060 requires AFRC to implement a process known as Interagency and Intergovernmental Coordination for Environmental Planning (IICEP), which is used for the purpose of agency coordination and implements scoping requirements. Forest Service Handbook 1909.15 Chapter 10 provides guidance to USFS scoping and agency coordination. On March 4, 2002, the IICEP process began. IICEP letters and the Description of the Proposed Action and Alternatives were sent to appropriate Federal and state agencies. In addition, 43 letters were sent to interested members of the public along with a summary of the Proposed Action. Comments were requested by April 20, 2002. Four letters were received (one from USFWS, one from EarthJustice, and two from the general public). Comments received during the IICEP and scoping process, along with the packages that were mailed, as well as the responses to comments are included in Appendix B of the Final EA.

After the IICEP and scoping process, the Draft EA was developed. Alternatives were refined as a result of comments received. After completion of the Draft EA, the document was made available for a 30-day comment period. A Notice of Availability was published in the Alexandria Town Talk on August 13, 2002 notifying the public of the availability of the Draft EA. Five copies of the document were made available to the public at the Calcasieu Ranger District Office. A copy of the Draft EA was also sent to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). Comments were requested by September 12, 2002. Three comments were received as a result of the 30-day comment period (one from USFWS, one from the SHPO, and one from the public). Comments received from Federal and state agencies are included in Appendix A of the Final EA.

#### **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Consultation**

As required under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA), the USFWS was consulted. USFWS reviewed the Description of Proposed Action and Alternatives and provided comments in a letter dated April 18, 2002. USFWS recommended that the EA fully discuss direct, indirect and cumulative impacts of the proposed project on the endangered RCW (*Picoides borealis*) and the threatened Louisiana pearlshell mussel (*Margaritifera hembeli*). USFWS specifically requested that the EA address potential effects on RCW population goals, KNF access for RCW management, and project related activities in streams flowing into and supporting the Louisiana pearlshell mussel.

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Furthermore, USFWS reviewed the Draft EA (DEA). In a letter dated September 24, 2002, USFWS stated that "The Service has reviewed your letter and DEA and based on the above information, we concur with your determination that the alternatives described in the DEA for proposed use and expansion of the Claiborne Range are not likely to adversely affect the red-cockaded woodpecker or the Louisiana pearlshell mussel."

#### **Finding of No Significant Impact**

Analyses performed in the EA addressed potential effects on noise, safety, land use, geological resources, water resources, biological resources, and cultural resources. The analyses revealed that implementation of the Proposed Action would have no significant direct, indirect, or cumulative effects on the quality of the natural or human environment.

Based on my review of the facts and analysis contained in this EA, prepared in accordance with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act, Council on Environmental Quality regulations, and Forest Service Manual Title 1900 Amendment No. 1900-92-4, I have determined that the Proposed Action would not have a significant individual or cumulative impact on the quality of the human or natural environment. This determination is based on the effects analysis documented in the Environmental Assessment, in light of the following factors listed in 40 CFR 1508.27.

#### ***Context***

The project area is currently a USAF bombing range. Aircraft have flown over the KNF and practiced bombing and strafing since 1972. The Proposed Action would increase the acreage of the current Range to accommodate new weapons systems and new aircraft, while providing adequate public safety. Because the Proposed Action is consistent with the current use of the land, and no changes to the land are anticipated, no significant adverse impacts are expected.

#### ***Intensity***

Both beneficial and adverse effects have been taken into consideration when making this determination of significance. Beneficial effects have not, however, been used to offset or compensate for potential adverse effects.

While the acres exposed to noise levels in the 65-69 dB range would increase, no adverse impacts are expected (see Section 3.1.2 of the EA).

Public health and safety should not be adversely affected (see Section 3.2.2 of the EA). In fact, long-term beneficial effects to public safety are expected as a result of increasing the Range boundary.

Minor adverse effects to recreation are anticipated (see Section 3.3.2 of the EA). The additional acreage placed into limited public access would limit the publics' use of the Forest. However, the USFS and USAF have provided mitigation to lessen the impact. The mitigation is described above.

Geological resources should not be adversely affected (see Section 3.4.2 of the EA).

Water resources should not be adversely affected (see Section 3.5.2 of the EA).

No significant impact to biological resources is expected (see Section 3.6.2 of the EA). The project area does contain the federally endangered red-cockaded woodpecker and the federally threatened Louisiana pearlshell mussel. Consultation with the USFWS has occurred. The USFWS concurs with the determination that the Proposed Action is not likely to adversely affect the red-cockaded woodpecker or the Louisiana pearlshell mussel (see Appendix A of the EA – USFWS letter).

Cultural resources should not be adversely affected (see Section 3.7.2 of the EA). Furthermore, consultation with the SHPO has occurred. The SHPO determined that the Proposed Action would not have an adverse effect on cultural or historic properties and, furthermore, the SHPO has no objections from a cultural resources standpoint to its implementation (see Appendix A of the EA – SHPO letter).

Although there is public disagreement over the potential for significant effects, scientific and professional experts consulted agree that the activities can be implemented without significant effects on the environment. Public disagreement is not sufficient to create controversy of the nature that would require an EIS. Bombing activities have been conducted on USFS land for many years and monitoring efforts have not identified significant effects.

This decision does not set a precedent for future decisions. Any future decisions within the analysis area or any other area on the Forest will need to consider all relevant scientific and site-specific information available at that time.

This action does not represent potential cumulative adverse impacts when considered in combination with other past or reasonably foreseeable actions. There would be no cumulative effects on the red-cockaded woodpecker or the Louisiana pearlshell mussel because there would be no activities that would alter the physical setting or permanently degrade resource values.

This action does not threaten a violation of any Federal, state, or local environmental protection law.

Therefore, USFS will allocate additional land resources, amend the *Revised Land and Resources Management Plan*, and re-issue a Special Use Permit to the USAF for use of Claiborne Range.

#### **Findings Required by Other Laws and Regulations**

In accordance with FSM 2672.4, a Biological Evaluation was prepared to evaluate the effects of the planned activities on PETS species. The USFWS concurred with the determination that the alternatives described in the Draft EA for the proposed use and expansion of the Claiborne Range are not likely to adversely affect the red-cockaded woodpecker or the Louisiana pearlshell mussel. There are no floodplains or wetlands on the site of the Proposed Action. The SHPO was consulted regarding the Proposed Action. After review of the Draft EA, the SHPO stated "it is our opinion that the proposed action will not have an adverse effect on historic properties. As a result, we have no objections from a cultural resources standpoint, to its implementation."

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Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington DC 20250-9410 or call (202) 720-5964 (voice and TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

### **Appeal Rights**

This decision is subject to appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215. The last day to appeal this decision is 45 days after a legal notice for this decision is published in the Alexandria Town Talk, Alexandria, LA. In order to be considered, a written Notice of Appeal must be postmarked or received within 45 days of the legal notice publication, at the following address:

USDA Forest Service, Southern Region  
Attn: Appeals Deciding Officer  
1720 Peachtree Road, NW  
Suite 811N  
Atlanta, GA 30367-9102

Anyone who appeals must provide the Regional Forester sufficient narrative evidence and argument to show why the decision by the District Ranger should be remanded or reversed. At a minimum, the notice of appeal must:

- State that it is an appeal pursuant to 36 CFR 215
- List the name and address of the appellant and, if possible, a telephone number
- Identify this decision, the date it was signed, and the decision maker
- Identify the change or changes in the decision that the appellant seeks, or the portion of the decision to which the appellant objects
- State how the decision fails to consider comment previously provided, either before or during the comment period specified in 36 CFR 215.6, and, if applicable, how the appellant believes the decision violates law, regulation, or policy

For additional information concerning the Forest Service appeal process, contact Cynthia A. Dancak, 2500 Shreveport Highway, Pineville, Louisiana 71360; telephone (318) 473-7160.

### **Implementation**

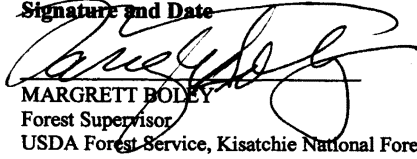
If no appeal is received, implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before 5 business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 days following the date of appeal disposition.

### **Contact Person**

For more information on this decision, contact Mr. Dan McDonald, Kisatchie National Forest, Calcasieu Ranger District, USFS, 9912 Highway 28 West, Boyce, LA 71409. Telephone: (318) 793-9427.

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Signature and Date



MARGRETT BOLEY  
Forest Supervisor  
USDA Forest Service, Kisatchie National Forest

5/8/03  
Date