

**DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY
UNITED STATES FLEET FORCES**

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT FOR ESTABLISHMENT OF MERIDIAN 2
MILITARY OPERATIONS AREA (MOA) AT NAVAL AIR STATION (NAS) MERIDIAN,
MISSISSIPPI**

Pursuant to Council of Environmental Quality Regulations (40 Code of Federal Regulations Parts 1500–1508) implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act, and in accordance with the Chief of Naval Operations Instruction 5090.1C, the United States Department of the Navy (Navy) gives notice that an Environmental Assessment (EA) has been prepared and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required for the establishment of the Meridian 2 MOA near NAS Meridian, Mississippi. The proposed action consists of the establishment of a new MOA, Meridian 2, which will result in the transit of Training Air Wing ONE (TW-1) aircraft between NAS Meridian and the proposed MOA, and an increase in sorties at NAS Meridian. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) was a cooperating agency in preparation of this EA.

NAS Meridian is in east-central Mississippi in Lauderdale and Kemper counties. The installation is approximately 15 miles northeast of the City of Meridian and occupies more than 8,000 acres of land, including McCain Field. The primary user of the proposed Meridian 2 MOA will be TW-1, which conducts flight training in the T-45C aircraft.

The purpose of the proposed action is to establish an additional MOA where student naval aviators can complete their required training sorties, alleviate the current MOA capacity shortfall, and ensure that mission capabilities are sustained. Adequate airspace to accommodate realistic military training is required to ensure naval aviators are mission-trained, qualified, and prepared to support real-world events. In the past, TW-1 did not complete some of the scheduled sorties in the local MOAs due in part to the congestion of airspace. This shortfall could result in extended pilot training periods, prolonging the time needed to achieve qualifications for deployment.

The need for the proposed action results from changes to the Navy's training syllabus and the increase in the use of existing local military airspace by other military units. The number of sorties flown by TW-1 will increase from 32,000 to 37,000 annually. The current MOAs do not have the capacity to support this increase of 5,000 sorties. The proposed action will alleviate the MOA capacity shortfall currently projected for TW-1. The proposed action is necessary to meet the U.S. Navy's obligations to train naval forces for combat under Title 10 U.S.C. Section 5062.

Proposed Action – The proposed action consists of the establishment of a new MOA, Meridian 2, near NAS Meridian, the transit of TW-1 aircraft between NAS Meridian and the proposed MOA, and a proposed increase in sorties at NAS Meridian. There will be no personnel changes or construction activities as part of the proposed action. The additional 5,000 sorties will take off from and land at NAS Meridian using existing flight tracks, profiles, and procedures. The transit region between NAS Meridian and the Meridian 2 MOA will not be designated as special use airspace and military training activities will not be conducted in this region.

The Meridian 2 MOA will have an altitude between 8,000 feet above mean sea level (MSL) and 17,999 feet MSL and will be divided into two sections; a northeastern block, referred to as Meridian 2 East; and a southwestern block, referred to as Meridian 2 West. The northeastern corner will be approximately 22 nautical miles (nm) southwest of NAS Meridian. Within the MOA, the airspace between 8,000 and 10,000 feet MSL will be used to transition to the airspace above 10,000 feet MSL, where training exercises will be conducted.

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The Region of Influence (ROI) for this EA included the area inside the 60-decibel (dB) Day-Night Average Sound Level (DNL) noise contour at NAS Meridian, the approximate transit region between NAS Meridian and the Meridian 2 MOA, the Meridian 2 MOA, and the land underneath the Meridian 2 MOA airspace. Consequently, the resources analyzed are divided into the three sections: NAS Meridian, the transit region to the Proposed Meridian 2 MOA, and the Meridian 2 MOA.

The EA considered the following alternatives to achieve the proposed action:

No Action Alternative – Under the No Action Alternative, the Meridian 2 MOA would not be established and the additional sorties would not be flown at NAS Meridian. TW-1 would continue to fly in congested MOAs which could result in an extended pilot training period, prolonging the time needed to achieve qualifications for deployment. Additionally, the purpose of and need for the proposed action would not be met.

Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis – The development of alternative training scenarios was based on the purpose and need to establish a military training environment that will meet and sustain the mission requirements of TW-1. This process involved analysis of operational needs and requirements for training activities.

The MOAs surrounding NAS Meridian (i.e., Meridian 1, Pine Hill, Camden Ridge, Birmingham Columbus 1, Columbus 2, Columbus 3, De Soto 1, De Soto 2, Pensacola North, Pensacola South, Eglin A, Eglin B, Eglin E, and Eglin F) were considered potential alternatives to meet the training requirements. However, these potential alternatives did not meet the screening criteria, including having a distance of less than 50 nm from the closest refueling point (i.e., Key Field Airport) to the center of the primary training area of the MOA, and were eliminated from further detailed analysis in the EA.

The EA examined potential effects of the proposed action and No Action Alternative on the following nine resource categories: air quality; noise; compatible land use; fish, wildlife, and plants; human health and safety; light emissions and visual resources; historical, architectural, archaeological, and cultural resources; hazardous materials and wastes; and socioeconomic resources, environmental justice, and children's environmental health and safety risks.

There will be no significant impacts on air quality. The air quality in each section of the ROI has been characterized by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as unclassified/attainment for all criteria pollutants. The increase in emissions at NAS Meridian will not cause or contribute to a violation of national or state ambient air quality standard, expose sensitive receptors to substantially increased pollutant concentrations, or exceed any evaluation criteria established by the Mississippi State Implementation Plan. Since no aircraft sorties within the transit region or MOA will occur below the mixing height of 3,000 feet above ground level, no impacts from aircraft emissions are expected.

There will be no significant impacts on the environment from noise. Noise represents the most identifiable concern associated with aircraft operations. For each of the three sections of the ROI, the U.S. Navy, the FAA, or both, conducted analysis of the potential impact of noise on the environment. The U.S. Navy and FAA modeling results concur that near NAS Meridian, there will be no significant changes in the average noise levels. The noise levels at NAS Meridian under the proposed action will likely increase

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by less than 1 dB DNL. It is unlikely that this increase would be noticeable by persons living in the vicinity of NAS Meridian.

Within the transit region, the noise modeling conducted by the FAA indicates that T-45C flights would result in noise increases of less than 5 dB DNL. Therefore, the FAA has determined that no additional analysis for the area under the transit region is needed and the U.S. Navy concurs.

Within the proposed MOA, the predicted average noise levels on the ground from aircraft flying in the proposed MOA will be approximately 36 to 38 dB DNL. This is well below the level at which speech interference or hearing loss could begin to occur (approximately 65 and 75 dB DNL, respectively). It is estimated that persons on the ground near an aircraft's flight path would hear aircraft flying in the proposed MOA a few times a month. Aircraft flyovers would not interfere with speech communication or other activities. The proposed action will not result in a significant change in overall background noise conditions for the area underlying the transit region or the MOA airspace.

There will be no significant impacts on land use. The proposed action will not involve changes to land use and will not affect the viability of existing land use in any section of the ROI.

There will be no significant impacts on fish, wildlife, or plants. There will be no ground-disturbing activities, and aircraft operations will generally occur above 7,000 MSL; therefore, no impacts on plants or habitat within any section of the ROI are expected. Fish and wildlife within all sections of the ROI are likely habituated to the noise levels from current operations and are expected to be unaffected by the minimal increases in noise levels under the proposed action.

The proposed action will not significantly increase the risk of bird/wildlife strikes. Aircraft operations will generally occur above 7,000 feet MSL in the transit region and above 8,000 feet MSL in the proposed MOA. NAS Meridian has recorded no bird/wildlife strikes at altitudes above 6,500 feet MSL. Therefore, within the transit region or Meridian 2 MOA, the potential for a bird/wildlife strike is very low.

No federally threatened or endangered species have been documented at NAS Meridian. However, two federally listed endangered species, stirrupshell (*Quadrula stapes*) and wood stork (*Mycteria americana*), plus three federally listed threatened species, Price's potato bean (*Apios priceana*), Louisiana black bear (*Ursus americanus luteolus*), and yellow-blotched map turtle (*Graptemys flavimaculata*), have potential to occur within NAS Meridian. No federally designated critical habitat occurs within NAS Meridian. Noise impacts and/or bird/wildlife strike incidents with any of the five federally listed species is unlikely as they are not documented on the installation.

Within the transit region, two federally listed endangered species, stirrupshell and wood stork, plus three federally listed threatened species, Gulf sturgeon (*Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi*), gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*), and Louisiana black bear, have potential to occur within the transit region. No federally designated critical habitat occurs within the transit region. The transit region of the proposed action will have no effect on these five federally listed species due to the height of the aircraft flights and minimal increase in noise levels.

Under the proposed Meridian 2 MOA, three federally endangered species, red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*), wood stork, and American chaffseed (*Schwalbea americana*), as well as four

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federally threatened species, Gulf sturgeon, Louisiana black bear, gopher tortoise, and yellow-blotched map turtle, could currently inhabit that area. No federally designated critical habitat occurs within the proposed Meridian 2 MOA. The proposed Meridian 2 MOA region will have no effect on these seven federally listed species due to the height of the aircraft flights and minimal increase in noise levels.

In summary, no effect on threatened or endangered species or critical habitat from noise or bird/wildlife strikes within any sections of the ROI are expected and no federally designated critical habitat occurs within any section of the ROI. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) concurred with this determination and formal consultation with the USFWS under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act will not be required.

There will be no significant impacts on human health and safety. Memphis Air Route Traffic Control Center, who will be the controlling agency for the proposed Meridian 2 MOA, reviewed the proposed action. Additional sorties within all sections of the ROI will not impact NAS Meridian's ability to coordinate military flights, or the FAA's ability to coordinate commercial traffic. The transit region between Key Field Airport and the proposed Meridian 2 MOA will remain non-military airspace; civilian aircraft operating in the area will continue to coordinate their flights with the Memphis Air Route Traffic Control Center in accordance with Federal Acquisition Regulation Part 91. There will be no significant impacts on the existing visual setting or from light emissions. In the transit region and MOA, normal aircraft lighting at the altitudes flown lack the intensity to have significant impacts on human activity and will be perceptible as twinkling lights. There will not be a substantial alteration to the existing visual setting.

There will be no significant impacts on historical, architectural, archaeological, or cultural resources. Currently, the U.S. Navy has not identified any resources within any sections of the ROI that qualify as traditional cultural properties, sacred sites, or sites of religious or cultural significance. Native American consulting parties were notified of the proposed action and offered no comments to the U.S. Navy. There will be no ground-disturbing activities and the acoustic changes to the ambient environment of archaeological and historical resources from aircraft over-flights will not be significant. The Mississippi State Historic Preservation Office was notified of the proposed action and the draft EA.

There will be no significant impacts on the environment from wastes and hazardous materials. The minimal increase in hazardous materials, hazardous wastes, and solid wastes will be handled under existing plans at NAS Meridian. No changes in the NAS Meridian fuel storage system will be required from the slight increase in jet fuel consumption.

There will be no significant impacts on socioeconomic resources, environmental justice, and children's environmental health and safety risks. No additional employees will be necessary; therefore, no changes to population demographics, employment, environmental justice, and children's environmental health and safety risks will occur. Disproportionate impacts on minority, low-income, or youth populations are not expected.

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Cumulative Impact - The Navy investigated other actions and projects for evaluation in the context of the cumulative impacts analysis. This research included a review of public documents and coordination with various applicable agencies. Considering that the geographic scope of the Project Action includes portions of 13 counties in Mississippi, emphasis was placed on identifying other projects that are similar in nature to the Proposed Action or large projects that could affect resources identified in this EA as potentially affected.

At NAS Meridian, there are a few construction activities which could have short-term impacts on air quality, noise, safety, hazardous materials and wastes, and other resources through the duration of construction activities. The proposed action involves no construction activities, so short-term environmental impacts that would occur during construction activities would have little potential for cumulative impacts on any resource area, and long-term impacts on sensitive resources are not anticipated. Therefore, no significant cumulative impacts on the environment from these construction projects at NAS Meridian when combined with the proposed action are expected.

The *Proposed Aircraft Conversion and Construction and Demolition Projects at the 186th Air Refueling Wing (ARW) of the Mississippi Air National Guard at Key Field Airport, Meridian, Mississippi EA* was reviewed for cumulative impacts within the transit region. As part of this project, nine KC-135R aircraft are being replaced by six C-27J aircraft at the 186th ARW at Key Field Airport. There will be a reduction in the number of planes and operations by the 186th ARW at Key Field, which is within the transit region of the ROI. The 186th ARW does not plan to train within the airspace proposed for the Meridian 2 MOA. Therefore, no significant cumulative impacts on the environment in the transit region are expected.

Two other projects outside the ROI were analyzed for cumulative impacts with the proposed action within the ROI. The U.S. Department of Energy prepared a Final EIS on the *Kemper County (MS) Integrated Gasification Combined Cycle (IGCC) Project*, assessing the environmental impacts for the construction and operation of an advanced power generation plant. As a connected action, a lignite mine is proposed adjacent to the plant, extending south into Lauderdale County. The proposed plant is approximately 10 miles northwest, and the proposed mine is 7 miles west of NAS Meridian. These projects are well outside the general area of consideration for this cumulative impacts analysis. There is little potential for cumulative impacts when considered with the proposed action in this EA, with the exception of air quality (greenhouse gases and criteria pollutant emissions), which will not have cumulative significant impacts. Therefore, no significant cumulative impacts on the environment when combined with the proposed action are expected.

Based on information gathered during the preparation of the EA, U.S. Navy finds that the proposed action will not have a significant impact on the environment. The EA prepared by the U.S. Navy addressing this action may be obtained from Meridian 2 MOA Project Manager, Naval Facilities Engineering Command, Atlantic, Lafayette River Complex, 6506 Hampton Boulevard, Norfolk, VA 23508. A limited number of hard copies of the EA are available to fill single copy requests.

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Date


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