

Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Navy Releases Final EIS for Growler Operations at NAS Whidbey Island

The Navy has released the Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) analyzing EA-18G Growler operations at the Naval Air Station (NAS) Whidbey Island Complex. It contains updated information since the release of the Draft EIS in November 2016 and identifies Alternative 2A as the preferred alternative.

Alternative 2A was announced as the Navy's preferred alternative on June 25, 2018. The announcement was made to provide the public the most updated information on the Navy's current position with respect to the proposed action. No decision has yet been made. The ultimate decision with respect to force structure and Field Carrier Landing Practice (FCLP) distribution will be made by the Secretary of the Navy or his representative and announced in a Record of Decision no earlier than 30 days following today's public release of the Final EIS.

Alternative 2A would establish two new expeditionary squadrons and add two aircraft to each squadron that operates off aircraft carriers (CVN). This alternative would add 36 aircraft home based at NAS Whidbey Island, increase the airfield operations at both Ault Field and Outlying Landing Field (OLF) Coupeville, and change the distribution of FCLP between the two airfields. This preferred alternative would provide the best, most realistic training for Navy pilots and take into consideration the noise impacts to all surrounding communities.

Ault Field would support 88,000 total airfield operations, which represents an increase of 9,800 annual operations over current conditions. OLF Coupeville would support 24,100 annual operations, which represents an increase of 17,590 operations per year. While there would be an increase in operations at both airfields under this alternative, Ault Field would still support four times the number of total aircraft operations when compared to OLF Coupeville. An airfield operation is defined as either a takeoff or landing; therefore, an FCLP pass counts as two operations. For context, in recent years OLF Coupeville has been used about 90 hours per year, or about one percent of the time. The Navy is proposing an increase in operations at OLF Coupeville to about 360 hours per year, or about four percent of the time.

The preferred alternative would place the majority of FCLP operations at OLF Coupeville because OLF Coupeville provides more realistic training for Navy aviators. OLF Coupeville has been continuously used for FCLP since the late 1960s. OLF Coupeville's pattern best replicates the CVN pattern, building and reinforcing the correct habit patterns and muscle memory. OLF Coupeville sits on a 200-foot ridge surrounded by flat terrain, similar to the aircraft carrier operating on the water. The low cultural lighting around Coupeville and the ability to completely darken the field also closely resembles at-sea conditions from the pilots' perspective.

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Before the introduction of the P-3 Orion to NAS Whidbey Island, Ault Field primarily supported only carrier-based aircraft. Today, Ault Field is a busy, multi-purpose airfield supporting both the tactical electronic attack mission and the maritime patrol mission. By 2021, the number of P-8 Poseidon aircraft supporting the maritime patrol mission will double. The redistribution of FCLP operations under Alternative 2A would optimize the use of both airfields to support the electronic attack and maritime patrol missions while considering the impacts on the surrounding communities.

Unlike OLF Coupeville, Ault Field sits in a valley surrounded by higher terrain, limiting pattern options and providing a visual picture unlike conditions at sea. The City of Oak Harbor and Ault Field both have artificial lighting and visual cues not experienced by pilots at sea. FCLP at Ault Field often disrupts departures and arrivals of other aircraft not participating in FCLP; this disruption results in extended flight tracks and longer hours of operation, which in turn affects more residents living in the community. The interruption of other vital operations from FCLP operations at Ault Field has become increasingly important with the addition of three additional Maritime Patrol and Reconnaissance squadrons to NAS Whidbey Island that operate the P-8 Poseidon, which is replacing the P-3 Orion.

The Navy announced a delay in the release of the Final EIS in September 2017 in order to analyze new information—specifically, a planned reduction in the number of pilots per squadron and the successful testing of Precision Landing Mode (PLM), formerly known as MAGIC CARPET. The reduction in pilots per squadron and the implementation of PLM will result in a 30-percent reduction in the FCLP requirement from that analyzed in the Draft EIS. This has a beneficial effect of reducing the overall environmental impacts. The Final EIS has been updated with a new noise analysis that reflects the reduction in airfield operations as well as a corresponding reduction in personnel and family members.

Public input was an important factor in the preparation of the Final EIS. The Navy considered 4,335 public comments received on the Draft EIS. The Final EIS has been updated with new and clarifying information to improve the accuracy and thoroughness of the analysis as a result of the public comments received on the Draft EIS. To assist the public in their review of the document, the Final EIS includes an expanded Table of Contents plus a Reader's Guide to locate important information of interest to the public. Section 1.12 responds to eight third-party reports submitted as public comments. Section 2.4 includes an expanded discussion regarding public suggestions for basing aircraft and training pilots. The Final EIS includes an expanded discussion of noise mitigations and summarizes this information in a new Appendix H for easy reference. Also, a new Appendix M provides Navy's responses to public comment themes received on the Draft EIS.

The Final EIS is available for review on the project website, <http://www.whidbeyeis.com>, along with other information about the project. While Appendix M contains Navy's responses to public comment themes, copies of the actual 4,335 public comments received on the Draft EIS are available for public inspection on the project website.

The public may review hard copies of the Final EIS at these local libraries: Oak Harbor City Library, Anacortes Public Library, La Conner Regional Library, Coupeville Library, San Juan Island Library, Lopez Island Library District, Orcas Island Public Library, Island Library, Camano Island Library, Mount Vernon City Library, Port Townsend Public Library, Guemes Island Library, Seattle Public Library, Burlington Public Library, Freeland Library, Langley Library, Clinton Library, North Olympic Library System Sequim, Bellingham Public Library, North Olympic Library System Port Angeles, Jefferson County Library, and Sedro-Woolley Library.