

Environmental Impact Statement for the EA-18G GROWLER AIRFIELD OPERATIONS



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PROPOSED ACTION

BACKGROUND

NAS Whidbey Island is home to all Navy electronic attack (VAQ) squadrons in the United States. The VAQ mission-related Navy functions have been performed almost exclusively at NAS Whidbey Island since 1970, and the need for the ongoing use of Ault Field and Outlying Landing Field (OLF) Coupeville will continue.

Over time, the VAQ mission has evolved, and efforts to ensure appropriate environmental analyses continue to evolve as well. A 2005 Environmental Assessment (EA) analyzed the replacement of Prowler aircraft with Growler aircraft, including the disestablishment of three expeditionary squadrons. In 2009, the Department of Defense directed the Navy to maintain the expeditionary VAQ capabilities indefinitely. As a result, the Navy prepared another EA in 2012, which analyzed retaining three expeditionary VAQ squadrons that operated the Prowlers and their transition to Growlers. Additionally, the 2012 EA analyzed the relocation of a reserve Prowler squadron from Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland, and the transition of that squadron to Growlers at NAS Whidbey Island.

Last September, the Navy began an EIS to evaluate the potential environmental impacts associated with the addition of two new expeditionary squadrons and additional Growler aircraft to the training squadron. Scoping was conducted between September 2013 and January 2014 on that proposed action, and open house scoping meetings were held in December 2013 to discuss the proposal.

During spring 2014, the Chief of Naval Operations submitted an Unfunded Requirements List as part of the President's Budget for Fiscal Year 2015 that included a request to purchase 22 additional Growler aircraft. While it is unclear whether more Growlers will ultimately be procured, the Navy is electing to analyze the potential for these aircraft in order to be proactive and transparent. Therefore, a new scoping process is needed and has been initiated based on the proposed action.

PROPOSED ACTION

To meet current and future mission and training requirements, the Navy proposes to:

- Continue and increase the existing VAQ operations at NAS Whidbey Island's Ault Field and OLF Coupeville;
- Increase VAQ capabilities and augment the training squadron by adding up to 36 aircraft to support an expanded Department of Defense mission for identifying, tracking, and targeting in a complex electronic warfare environment;
- Construct and renovate facilities at Ault Field to accommodate additional aircraft; and
- Station additional personnel at, and relocate family members to, NAS Whidbey Island and the surrounding community.

The EIS will build upon analyses previously completed in 2005 and 2012 and will assess the noise environment as well as specific airfield operations at NAS Whidbey Island for this proposed action. Additionally, the EIS will consider public comments received during both the 2013 public scoping and during the current scoping period.

ALTERNATIVES

The revised EIS scope will analyze impacts from multiple alternatives for operating the Growler aircraft inventory out of NAS Whidbey Island. The alternatives include variations of the following factors:

1. Total number of aircraft to be purchased
2. Number of aircraft assigned per squadron
3. Number of land-based squadrons
4. The distribution of aircraft operations at NAS Whidbey Island between Ault Field and OLF Coupeville

Alternative	Force Structure	Total Number of Growler Aircraft (including existing and new aircraft)	Additional New Aircraft with Each Alternative
No Action Alternative (Baseline for comparison)	9 carrier squadrons x 5 aircraft 3 expeditionary squadrons x 5 aircraft 1 reserve squadron x 5 aircraft Training squadron with 17 aircraft	82	N/A
Alternative 1:	9 carrier squadrons x 5 aircraft	95	13

Establish 2 new expeditionary squadrons	<p>5 expeditionary squadrons x 5 aircraft</p> <p>1 reserve squadron x 5 aircraft</p> <p>Training squadron with 20 aircraft (+3)</p>		
<p>Alternative 2:</p> <p>Add 2 aircraft to each carrier squadron</p>	<p>9 carrier squadrons x 7 aircraft</p> <p>3 expeditionary squadrons x 5 aircraft</p> <p>1 reserve squadron x 5 aircraft</p> <p>Training squadron with 23 aircraft (+6)</p>	106	24
<p>Alternative 3:</p> <p>Add 3 aircraft to each carrier squadron</p>	<p>9 carrier squadrons x 8 aircraft</p> <p>3 expeditionary squadrons x 5 aircraft</p> <p>1 reserve squadron x 5 aircraft</p> <p>Training squadron with 25 aircraft (+8)</p>	117	35
<p>Alternative 4:</p> <p>Establish 2 new expeditionary squadrons and add 2 aircraft to each carrier squadron</p>	<p>9 carrier squadrons x 7 aircraft</p> <p>5 expeditionary squadrons x 5 aircraft</p> <p>1 reserve squadron x 5 aircraft</p> <p>Training squadron with 25 aircraft (+8)</p>	118	36
<p>Notes:</p> <p>New squadrons and/or changes to the number of aircraft in an existing squadron are indicated by red text.</p>			

In developing the proposed range of alternatives, the Navy utilized long-established operational considerations, which are more fully described in the 2005 and 2012 Environmental Assessments for the replacement of the Prowler aircraft with the newer Growler aircraft at NAS Whidbey Island. These considerations include the fact that all of the Navy's electronic attack mission and training facilities are located at NAS Whidbey Island, including the substantial infrastructure and training ranges that have developed in over 40 years of operation; the location of suitable airfields that provide for the most realistic training environment; the distance aircraft would have to travel to accomplish training; and the expense of duplicating existing capabilities elsewhere.

No Action Alternative

The No Action alternative, although it doesn't meet the purpose and need, would serve as a baseline against which impacts of the proposed action can be evaluated. Under the No Action alternative, no additional VAQ aircraft would be home based at NAS Whidbey Island. The transition from Prowler to Growler aircraft is anticipated to be complete by January 2016. Under the No Action alternative, legacy Prowlers would gradually transition to Growler aircraft (approximately 82 aircraft), and annual operations would be maintained at levels consistent with those identified in the 2005 and 2012 environmental assessments.





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