GOMEX Range Complex

Background

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Gulf of Mexico Range Complex

The Gulf of Mexico (GOMEX) Range Complex represents an essential combination of air, land, and sea space that provides realistic training areas for Navy personnel. For nearly seven decades the area has supported Navy training activities, and is now host to a wide range of training every year to ensure the nation's military is fully prepared when in harm's way. The GOMEX Range Complex (see Figure) includes air, land and offshore areas of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. The GOMEX Range Complex is also host to activities for research, development, testing, and evaluation (RDT&E) of emerging maritime combat technologies.

The GOMEX Range Complex (see map) is a training area that includes sea space, Special Use Airspace (SUA), and land ranges. The range complex also includes facilities and instrumentation areas that support training or research activities.

Background

The Gulf of Mexico (GOMEX) Range Complex is a combination of sea and airspace where Navy and Marine Corps training is conducted. The Navy has prepared an Environmental Impact Statement/Overseas Environmental Impact Statement (EIS/OEIS) to comprehensively evaluate effects of current and future Naval activities within the GOMEX Range Complex on the natural, cultural, and socioeconomic resources. This comprehensive evaluation is part of a larger Navy program, the Tactical Training Theater Assessment and Planning (TAP) Program. Under the TAP Program, the Navy will for the first time manage its training areas within broad geographic locations known as range complexes. The GOMEX Range Complex is one of 17 U.S. Navy range complexes around the world.

What is the purpose of the action?

Realistic training is the single greatest asset the Navy has in preparing and protecting its personnel. "Train As We Fight" is not just a phrase - it is a statement of the absolute necessity to realistically train Naval personnel for the conditions in which they may find themselves while protecting the nation.

International events, changes in naval strategy, base closures, and population growth are increasing the challenges the Navy faces in training their personnel to be prepared to defend the nation. To face these challenges and continue to provide combat

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capable forces that are ready to deploy worldwide, the Navy is comprehensively evaluating and planning activities at the range complex level. The purpose of the proposed action is to:

- Achieve and maintain Fleet readiness using the GOMEX Range Complex to support and conduct current, emerging, and future training operations and RDT&E operations;
- Expand warfare missions supported by the GOMEX Range Complex; and
- Upgrade and modernize existing range capabilities to enhance and sustain Navy training and RDT&E.

Why is the action needed?

The need for the proposed action is to provide range capabilities for training and equipping combat-capable naval forces ready to deploy worldwide. In this regard, the GOMEX Range Complex furthers the Navy’s execution of its Congressionally-mandated roles and responsibilities under Title 10 U.S.C §5062. To implement this Congressional mandate, the Navy needs to:

- Maintain current levels of military readiness by training in the GOMEX Range Complex;
- Support the rapid deployment of naval units or strike groups;
- Achieve and sustain readiness of ships and squadrons so the Navy can quickly surge significant combat power in the event of a national crisis or contingency operation consistent with the Fleet Response Training Plan (FRTP);
- Support the acquisition and implementation into the Fleet of advanced military technology. The GOMEX Range Complex must adequately support the testing and training needed for new vessels, aircraft, and weapons systems; and
- Maintain the long-term viability of the GOMEX Range Complex while protecting human health and the environment and enhancing the quality and communication capability and safety of the range complex.

Support to current, emerging, and future training and RDT&E operations, including implementation of range enhancements, entails the actions that will be evaluated in this EIS/OEIS. These assessed actions include:

- Increased use of contractor-operated aircraft that simulate enemy aircraft during training (Commercial Air Services [CAS] Support for Fleet Opposition Forces [OPFOR] and Electronic Warfare Threat Training);
- Support of basic flight instruction and mission area training for pilot proficiency; and
- Implementation of the Joint National Training Capability (JNTC) within the GOMEX Range Complex.

What will be evaluated?

The Navy understands and recognizes that training activities may have potential effects on the environment, as well as to the community and the stakeholders that rely on these resources. The Navy will analyze several alternatives to determine the effects of potential actions on natural, cultural and socioeconomic resources. Additionally, public input received during the scoping phase of the process will be carefully considered as alternatives are refined and analyzed. Currently, three alternatives have been identified to be analyzed:

**No Action Alternative:**

The No Action Alternative analyzes the variety of training and testing activities that currently occur within the GOMEX Range Complex. Under the No Action Alternative, training and testing operations would continue at current levels. No new or additional training or testing operations or infrastructure improvements would be implemented.

**Alternative 1:**

Alternative 1 consists of the No Action Alternative plus: elimination of Mine Warfare training; certain adjustments to training levels; and implementation of enhancements, as necessary to meet the components of the proposed action. This alternative is composed of all operations currently conducted – the No Action Alternative – with modifications to current training or introduction of new training. Specifically, the training modifications would include: a) conducting new training associated with VFA-204 air-to-surface bomb training; and b) elimination of mine warfare training (mine countermeasures and mine neutralization) within the GOMEX Range Complex. The proposed range enhancements under Alternative 1 are to use more commercial aircraft to serve as oppositional forces rather than using Navy aircraft for Air Intercept Control Exercises.

**Alternative 2**

Alternative 2 consists of Alternative 1 plus: implementation of additional enhancements to enable the range complex to meet foreseeable needs, including implementation of the Joint National Training Capability (JNTC) within the GOMEX Range Complex. Unlike Alternative 1, under Alternative 2, the Navy proposes to eliminate the use of High Explosive (HE) bombs during major exercise air-to-surface bombing events. Non-explosive Practice Munition (NEPM) bombs will continue to be used during major exercises, and four HE bombs are proposed to be released during one unit level training event under Alternative 2.