



Silver Strand Training Complex

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Proposed Action and Alternatives

BACKGROUND

In accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, the U.S. Navy has prepared a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to evaluate the potential environmental effects of ongoing and proposed Naval activities within the Silver Strand Training Complex (SSTC) and southern nearshore areas of Naval Air Station North Island.

The Navy's Proposed Action for SSTC is a step toward ensuring the continued vitality of this essential Navy training asset and that it has the capability and capacity to support current and future training requirements.

DEFENDING THE NATION

Defending the United States and protecting military personnel requires rigorous, real-life training in the air, on land and at sea. Providing realistic training is one of the most important things the U.S. Navy does to ensure service members are ready and able to respond to national security challenges. Readiness requires specialized locations where military personnel can learn through practical, hands-on experience the technical skills necessary to effectively plan, conduct and succeed in combat.

PURPOSE AND NEED

To improve the availability and quality of training at SSTC, and to prepare for future training requirements, various improvements are needed. SSTC accommodates many critical training programs found only at SSTC, making these improvements a necessity. The Proposed Action is needed to accommodate the following future military readiness requirements:

Increased usage at SSTC

Increased use of SSTC is required to accommodate: shorter training cycles to ensure military units are ready for deployment; the expansion and restructuring of various commands, which would increase the number of personnel cycling through training programs; expanded use of other southwest training ranges; and training on new and upgraded equipment.

Year-round access to training areas

Beach areas currently used for training activities are not sufficient for future training requirements due to current seasonal restrictions. In order to support future training requirements and deployment schedules, access to these existing training areas for year-round training is needed.

Flexibility and realistic training

SSTC is located in a populated coastal area, and its use for realistic military training is constrained by adjacent residential, commercial, recreational, cultural and sensitive natural resource uses. Operational constraints on training areas at SSTC make it challenging for Navy commands to support emerging and expected future training requirements. A training range that realistically simulates environments that operators will encounter overseas, and prevents encumbrances that adversely affect training, is an ongoing need of commands that train at SSTC.



PROPOSED ACTION

The Navy proposes to improve the availability and quality of training opportunities at SSTC to achieve the required level of operational readiness as mandated under federal law. To meet training requirements, the Navy proposes to:

- ▶ Continue current training activities;
- ▶ Increase training frequency and types of training;
- ▶ Conduct existing routine training activities at additional locations within established training areas;
- ▶ Introduce new platforms and equipment; and
- ▶ Increase access and availability to existing beach and inland training areas.

Implementation of the Proposed Action would allow the Navy to meet its mission-oriented requirements by providing diverse and realistic training activities at SSTC, improving accessibility to training areas and reducing encroachment restraints.

EVALUATING THE ALTERNATIVES

The Draft EIS analyzes three alternatives to understand the potential environmental impacts of ongoing and proposed Naval activities within SSTC.

No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, training activities would be conducted at baseline levels at SSTC. Under the No Action Alternative, SSTC would not accommodate an increase in frequency or types of training, would not increase access and availability of training areas, and would not introduce new platforms and equipment. This alternative provides a baseline for assessing the potential environmental impacts of the other alternatives.

Alternative 1 (Preferred Alternative)

Alternative 1 is the Navy's Preferred Alternative. It is designed to meet 100 percent of the current and near-term training requirements.

Alternative 1 proposes to:

Increase the frequency of training

Training activities would increase from 3,926 to 5,343 activities annually.

Introduce new types of training activities

In addition to current training activities, the Navy proposes to conduct new types of mine countermeasure, amphibious and special warfare training activities.

Conduct existing routine training at additional locations within SSTC training areas

Most training activities are conducted in select portions of SSTC based on training needs. Some of these activities would be allowed to use additional locations within SSTC for diversity in training.

Introduce new platforms and equipment into training

The introduction of new platforms and equipment would consist of Expeditionary Fighting Vehicles, an updated Offshore Petroleum Discharge System and the MH-60R/S Seahawk Multi-Mission helicopter.

Increase Navy access to and availability of SSTC training areas

Currently, the Navy sets aside Beach Lanes Blue 2, Orange 1 and Orange 2 for California least tern and western snowy plover nesting for six months each year (from April through September). Training is restricted in these lanes during the nesting season. Increased access and availability to these three training lanes is needed to accommodate the proposed increase in training activities and diversity, and would be implemented if either of the following two criteria are met: 1) if Red 1 and 2, Green 1 and 2, and Blue 1 are currently occupied or unavailable for use, or 2) if attributes of Blue 2, Orange 1 and/or Orange 2 make those lanes more suitable for meeting training needs than other available training lanes. The Navy would limit the number of western snowy plover nests that are marked for avoidance to 22 concurrent nests. Further, the Navy proposes to allow increased access to SSTC-South inland training areas, which would allow foot traffic in vernal pools when they are dry.

Alternative 2

Alternative 2 is also designed to meet current and near-term training requirements, and includes all activities described under Alternative 1. The primary difference is that Alternative 2 would allow year-round training and greater Navy access to training areas at SSTC-North. Alternative 2 proposes to fully utilize all 7,000 yards of ocean beaches along SSTC-North and SSTC-South and all bayside training beaches, except the California least tern nesting habitat at Delta North and South, for continuous, year-round training.

Alternative 1 is the Navy's Preferred Alternative, because it would fully support the type and frequency of activities required to achieve complete Fleet readiness and allow the Navy to carry out its mission in the Silver Strand Training Complex. Alternative 1 also more actively manages protected and threatened species through access and training restrictions.

