

**DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION  
FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION**

**ADOPTION OF UNITED STATES AIR FORCE**

**PLAYAS MILITARY OPERATING AREA AND RED FLAG-RESCUE**

**SUPPLEMENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT**

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT**

**AND RECORD OF DECISION FOR**

**Establishing the Playas Temporary Military Operation Area**

**New Mexico**

**May 2019**

**Introduction**

This document serves as the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) adoption of the United States Air Force (USAF) *Playas Military Operating Area<sup>1</sup> and Red Flag Rescue Supplemental Environmental Analysis* (SEA), dated February 2018 (“USAF SEA”). The FAA is also relying on and incorporating by reference the USAF letter to the FAA, dated April 23, 2019, (referred to as the “Letter” and enclosed herein as “Enclosure 1”) and its accompanying attachments, to support this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and Record of Decision (ROD). The Letter demonstrates that the “analysis presented in the [USAF SEA] covers the activities proposed at Playas Temporary MOA for the August 2019 exercise.”

Pursuant to section 102 of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended, the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations (40 Code of Federal Regulations [C.F.R.] Parts 1500-1508) implementing the procedural provisions of NEPA, the FAA announces its decision to adopt the February 2018 USAF SEA for the purpose of temporary activation of the airspace in the form of a Temporary Military Operations Area (TMOA) over the Playas, New Mexico Training and Research Center to allow for a Training and Readiness Certification Exercise (CERTEX). The USAF SEA complies with FAA Order 1050.1F, Chapter 4 (Impact Categories, Significance, and Mitigation).

**Prior NEPA Documentation**

On August 4, 2017, FAA adopted the *U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) Tactical Recovery of Aircraft and Personnel (TRAP) and Training Readiness Certification Exercise (CERTEX for Playas, Temporary Military Operations Area (TMOA) TMOA Environmental Assessment (EA)* (“2017 EA”) dated June 23,

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<sup>1</sup> A permanent Military Operations Area does not exist. This document provides for the FAA’s creation of a *Temporary Military Operating Area (TMOA)*, the publication of the TMOA in the Notice to Airman (commonly referenced as NTAP), and the activation of the TMOA.  
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2017, which is Appendix A of the USAF SEA. The FAA adopted the 2017 EA and executed a FONSI/ROD in August 2017. (See Appendix B of the USAF SEA).<sup>2</sup>

As noted in the introductory section above, the USAF prepared the USAF SEA dated February 2018. See Attachment 1 of the Letter. The FAA adopted the USAF SEA and executed a FONSI/ROD in February 2018 (Enclosure 2).

The USMC prepared the *Supplemental Environmental Analysis for Temporary Activation of Playas Military Operations Area*, (“USMC SEA”), dated July 16, 2018 (Enclosure 3). The FAA adopted each section of this USMC SEA except for the cumulative impacts analysis and executed a FONSI/ROD in July 2018. (See Attachment 2 of the Letter).

## **Background**

### **Airspace Proposal**

On January 28, 2019, the FAA received a formal airspace proposal from the USAF for a TMOA. See Attachment 3 of the Letter. FAA Order JO 7400.2M describes the steps required to process a non-rule making Special Use Airspace (SUA) action. Primary service area responsibilities include tasking the controlling agency to conduct an aeronautical study, circularize the proposal to solicit public comment, review draft environmental documents, coordinate with other FAA Lines of Business, mitigate any Air Traffic or substantive public concerns, and prepare the final service area recommendation to Headquarters FAA.

FAA prepared a circular and mailed the circular to 42 interested aviation groups in the areas required by JO 7400.2M. Circularization of the aeronautical proposal<sup>3</sup> was published with the case number 18-AWP-21NR from February 13 – April 1, 2019 and resulted in zero public comments. The circularization referenced two events, a USAF exercise in May 2019 and another in August 2019. The May 2019 event was canceled, but the August 2019 event is the proposed action as discussed further below.

### **Military Operations Area (MOA)**

A MOA is airspace designated outside of Class A airspace, to separate or segregate certain nonhazardous military activities from Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) traffic and to identify for Visual Flight Rules (VFR) traffic where these activities are conducted. MOAs are designed to contain nonhazardous, military flight activities including, but not limited to, air combat maneuvers, air intercepts, low altitude tactics, etc. According to FAA Order 7400.2M, Chapter 25, Section 25-1-7, a temporary MOA is defined as:

- a. Temporary MOAs are designated to accommodate the military’s need for additional airspace to periodically conduct exercises that supplement routine training. When existing airspace is inadequate to accommodate these short-term military exercises, temporary MOAs may be established for a period not to exceed 45 days. On a case-by-case basis, Airspace Regulations

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<sup>2</sup> The FONSI dated August 4, 2017 references an August 3, 2017 EA in error. The correct date of the EA is June 23, 2017. The term in the EA and FONSI, “Military Operating Area” was made in error and should be Military Operations Area.

<sup>3</sup> The Aeronautical Proposal (AP) (Enclosure 1, Attachment 3) incorrectly states that the Air Traffic Control Assigned Airspace (ATCAA) would have a ceiling of FL220. The ceiling of FL220 was ultimately not approved by the air traffic facility, and the AP was not amended. An ATCAA with a ceiling of FL200 was approved and is also the proposed ATCAA. ATCAAs are established by the controlling agency (FAA) and using agency (USAF) through a Letter of Agreement (LOA). The LOA will correctly reflect the ceiling of FL200.

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and ATC Procedures Group may approve a longer period if the proponent provides justification for the increase.

b. When it is determined that the need for a temporary MOA will occur on a regular and continuing basis, the airspace should be considered for establishment as a permanent MOA with provisions for activation by NOTAM/Special Notice disseminated well in advance of scheduled exercises.

c. Once a temporary MOA is approved, the military must be responsible for publicizing the exercise within 100 miles of the affected airspace. The publicity may be accomplished through the public media, pilot forums, distribution of information bulletins to known aviation interests, etc.

### **Proposed Federal Action**

FAA's proposed action is to provide temporary activation of the Playas TMOA for a period not to exceed five days during an 18-day window from August 10 - 24, 2019. The Playas TMOA will be activated by publishing a Notice to Airman (NOTAM) two cycles (56 days) prior to the exercise in the Notices to Airman Publication (NTAP). The Aeronautical Proposal lists the participating aircraft types and the legal description and can be found in the USAF Proposal. See Attachment 3 of the Letter.

### **Purpose and Need**

The purpose of the proposed action is to provide an integrated, properly configured, realistic military training airspace with adequate dimension and size to support combat search and rescue training for U.S. and allied air-combat aircrews, para-rescue teams, survival specialists, intelligence personnel, air battle managers and Joint Personnel Recovery Center personnel. The need for the proposed action is driven by the need to conduct realistic combat rescue training.

### **Alternatives**

NEPA, the CEQ regulations, and FAA Order 1050.1F require consideration of a No Action Alternative. Prior NEPA documentation and environmental impact analysis were completed for two alternatives: the No Action Alternative and the Proposed Action.

### **Environmental Impacts**

The USAF SEA analyzed or incorporated by reference prior analyses of the following impact categories:

- Air Quality
- Biological resources (including fish, wildlife, and plants)
- Historical, architectural, archeological, and cultural resources
- Noise and compatible land use

The Proposed Action would not involve land acquisition, physical disturbance, or construction activities. The following NEPA impact categories were assessed and were considered to have potentially negligible or non-existent effects, and in accordance with CEQ regulations, did not warrant further analysis in the USAF SEA:

- Climate
- Coastal resources
- Department of Transportation Act, Section 4(f)
- Farmlands
- Hazardous materials, solid waste, and pollution prevention
- Land use
- Natural resources and energy supply
- Socioeconomics, environmental justice, and children's environmental health and safety risks

- Visual effects (including light emissions)
- Water resources (including wetlands, floodplains, surface waters, groundwater, and wild and scenic rivers)

The following sections contains the results of the FAA’s independent evaluation regarding the potential environmental impacts associated with the Proposed Action:

Noise and Land Use:

The USAF SEA analyzed three different scenarios referred to as “packages” in the document, for aircraft in the proposed TMOA. (See Attachment 1 of the Letter. Pages 2-3 has a description of the packages and pages 5-6 include an explanation of the strategy for analyzing noise and air quality.) The modeling of aircraft operation for Red Flag-Rescue was performed using the Version 3 of the Military Operating Area and Range Noise Model (MR\_NMAP) modeling software. MR\_NMAP is an FAA-Approved Model.<sup>4</sup>

The metric used for portraying noise levels for aircraft operations, in SUA, and used for analyzing the military’s impacts is the “Onset Rate-Adjusted Monthly Day-Night Sound Level”, depicted by the symbol Ldnmr. The Onset Rate-Adjusted Monthly Day-Night Sound Level metric is similar to the “Day-Night Average Sound Level” represented by the symbols Ldn or DNL used at military and civilian airfields, in that it includes the same 10 decibel (dB) penalty (i.e., adjustment) for aircraft operations that occurs after 10 p.m. at night.

However, because flight operations in MOAs may result in noise levels increasing rapidly for a short period of time, another adjustment may be incorporated to account for the high onset rate of aircraft noise (sometimes referred to as the “surprise” effect). Aircraft events exhibiting a high onset rate are assessed a penalty ranging from 0-11 dB. The Ldnmr is calculated from the month with the most aircraft operations because airspace activity varies more than airfield activity. All noise metrics are weighted. Weighted sound levels have been shown to correlate moderately well with the human response to noise to emphasize the range of the frequency spectrum. When A-weighting is applied to noise levels, very high and very low sound frequencies that are outside the range of human hearing are screened out, thereby weighting the sound to reflect what people actually hear. All metrics (Ldn and Ldnmr) used for aircraft noise are A-weighted.

The modeling included operations associated with the two Red Flag-Rescue training events that occur at the Playas, New Mexico Training and Research Center (PTRC) to ensure the cumulative noise impacts of two planned<sup>5</sup> training exercises were captured. The annual average Ldnmr for the various packages is shown in Table 3 of the SEA: 47.3, 50.5 and 49.2 Ldnmr.

The FAA requested that the USAF present the noise results from the USAF SEA in DNL to support the proposed August 2019 exercise. The same aircraft, data inputs, and modeling software used in the USAF SEA were applied and the noise model was rerun on December 14, 2018, resulting in an average value of 62 dB DNL. (See Attachment 4 of the Letter for the noise analysis results and data.) After the December 2018 noise analysis was performed, the USAF made the decision to eliminate the F-16 aircraft from the proposed August 2019 exercise. By eliminating F-16 aircraft from the USAF’s proposed exercise, the potential noise impacts are expected to be less than what was modeled. F-16s were the loudest aircraft included in the noise model. Therefore, the noise results are highly conservative.

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<sup>4</sup> FAA’s Desk Reference for FAA’s Environmental Policy Order 1050.1F, chapter 11.

<sup>5</sup> Although two events were originally planned for 2019, one in May and another in August, the USAF is now only proposing an August 2019 event.

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Under FAA Order 1050.1F, an action would cause a significant noise effect if it “would increase noise by DNL 1.5 dB or more for a noise sensitive area that is exposed to noise at or above the DNL 65 dB noise exposure level, or that will be exposed at or above the 65 DNL dB due to a 1.5 dB or greater increase, when compared to the no action alternative for the same timeframe.” The Order also requires that special consideration be given to the evaluation of the significance of noise impacts on noise sensitive areas within certain specified types of properties, including national wildlife refuges and historic sites “including traditional cultural properties” where the land use compatibility guidelines in 14 CFR part 150 are not relevant.

A Noise Sensitive Area is defined as an area where noise interferes with normal activities associated with its use. Normally, noise sensitive areas include residential, educational, health, and religious structures and sites, and parks, recreational areas, areas with wilderness characteristics, wildlife and waterfowl refuges, and cultural and historical sites.<sup>6</sup> The FAA has identified no noise sensitive areas underneath the proposed TMOA. (See Attachment 1, page 9, of the Letter).

Based on the noise modeling and the resulting Ldnmr and DNL values, the Proposed Action would not have a significant impact on the environment.

#### Air Quality:

Under FAA Order 1050.1F, an action would significantly affect air quality if it would “cause pollutant concentrations to exceed one or more of the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS), as established by the Environmental Protection Agency under the Clean Air Act, for any of the time periods analyzed, or to increase the frequency or severity of any such existing violations.” According to the CAA, the NAAQS are applicable to all areas of the United States and associated territories. For the poor air quality regions that have ambient concentrations of criteria pollutants above the NAAQS, the EPA has designated these areas as not being in attainment of the NAAQS, or “nonattainment areas.”

The proposed Temporary MOA is located in Hidalgo County, NM, which is in attainment. The Air Force’s Air Conformity Applicability Model (ACAM) was used to perform an analysis to assess the potential air quality impact/s associated with the action in accordance with the Air Force Instruction 32-7040, Air Quality Compliance and Resource Management; the Environmental Impact Analysis Process (EIAP, 32 CFR 989); and the General Conformity Rule (GCR, 40 CFR 93 Subpart B). Attachment 1 of the Letter<sup>7</sup> contains the ACAM reports for each of the scenarios. These air quality indicators are EPA General Conformity Rule (GCR) thresholds (de minimis levels). Therefore, these indicators do not trigger a regulatory requirement; however, they provide a warning that the action is potentially significant.

Given the GCR de minimis threshold values are the maximum net change an action can acceptably emit in nonattainment and maintenance areas, these threshold values would also conservatively indicate whether the activities contained in the proposed action’s emissions within an attainment area would also be acceptable. An air quality indicator value of 100 tons/year is used based on the GCR de minimis threshold for the least severe non-attainment classification for all criteria pollutants (see 40 CFR 93.153). Therefore, the worst-case year emissions were compared against the GCR Indicator and are summarized in Appendix D of the 2017 EA. None of the estimated emissions associated with this action are above

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<sup>6</sup> FAA Order 1050.1F, para. 11.5.b.(10).

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix D of the 2017 EA and pages 2-3 of the 2018 USAF SEA. All of these documents are contained in Attachment 1 of the Letter.

the GCR indicators. Therefore, no significant impact to air quality is anticipated and no further air quality assessment is needed.

**Historic Architectural, Archeological, and Cultural Resources:**

The 2017 EA contains the documentation between the USMC and the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). The New Mexico SHPO issued its No-Effect determination on May 25, 2017. See Appendix A to 2017 EA.

The USAF consulted with the SHPO again on March 15, 2019 at the request of the FAA. In the consultation letter the USAF indicated that the proposed August 2019 exercise is similar to those held on August 9-10, 2017 by the USMC and would have the same Area of Potential Effects. The SHPO concurred on March 26, 2019 that the proposed August 2019 exercise would not affect historic properties. (See Attachment 5 to the Letter).

**Cumulative Impacts:**

The proposed action will not result in a significant cumulative impact as a result of the establishment of the additional TMOA. Analysis of the Proposed Action, when considered cumulatively with past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions, would not result in adverse and/or significant impacts to noise, air quality, historical, architectural, archeological and cultural resources. Based on an independent review of the airspace proposal and the USAF SEA, the FAA has determined there would be no significant cumulative impacts as a result of the establishment of the TMOA.

**Impact Analysis**

Based on documentation contained in the USAF SEA and the Letter (Enclosure 1) incorporated into this FONSI/ROD, no significant adverse environmental impacts are associated with the Proposed Action. The attached USAF SEA addresses the effects of the Proposed Action on the human and natural environment and is made a part of this FONSI.

The Letter provided in Enclosure 1 presents the noise results in DNL and also indicates that impacts described in the 2019 analysis for each impact category would be similar or less than those analyzed in the 2018 USAF SEA. The USAF consulted with the SHPO and the SHPO concurred with the no effect determination in March 2019. The remaining data and analyses contained in the USAF SEA and the February and July 2018 FONSI/RODs are substantially valid and there are no significant new circumstances or information relevant to environmental concerns and bearing on the proposed action or its impacts.

Because there are no environmental impacts associated with the Proposed Action that would exceed applicable thresholds of significance, the action is not one normally requiring preparation of an EIS, no special circumstances apply, and the brief duration of the proposed action, circulation and review of the Draft USAF SEA was not warranted in accordance with FAA Order 1050.1F, Environmental Impacts: Policies and Procedures.

**Adoption**

The FAA has conducted an independent evaluation of the USAF SEA and the Letter. Based on its independent evaluation, the FAA has determined that the USAF SEA and Letter dated April 23, 2019 adequately assess and disclose the environmental impacts of the Las Playas Temporary MOA and that adoption of the USAF SEA and Letter by the FAA is authorized under 40 C.F.R. § 1506.3 and FAA Order 1050.1F, paragraph 8-2.c.

**Finding**

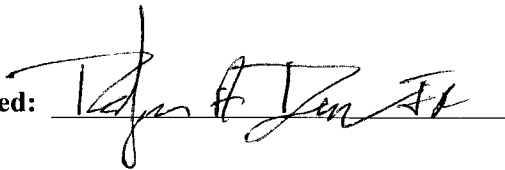
The FAA has determined that no significant impacts would occur as a result of the Federal Action and therefore preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not warranted, and a Finding of No Significant Impact, in accordance with 40 CFR Part 1501.4(e), is appropriate.

**Statement**

After careful and thorough consideration of the facts contained herein, the undersigned finds that the proposed Federal action is consistent with existing national environmental policies and objectives as set forth in Section 101 of the NEPA and other applicable environmental requirements will not significantly affect the quality of the human environment or otherwise include any condition requiring consultation pursuant to Section 102(2) (C) of NEPA.

**Order and Right of Appeal**

This decision to adopt the airspace portion of the USAF SEA constitutes an order of the FAA Administrator pursuant to 49 U.S.C. § 40103. It is subject to exclusive judicial review under 49 U.S.C. §46110 by the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia or the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the circuit in which the person contesting the decision resides or has its principal place of business. Any party having substantial interest in this order may apply for review of the decision by filing a petition for review in the appropriate U.S. Court of Appeals no later than 60 days after the order is issued in accordance with the provisions of 49 U.S.C. §46110. Any party seeking to stay implementation of the ROD must file an application with the FAA prior to seeking judicial relief as provided in Rule 18(a) of the Federal Rules of Appellate Procedure.

Approved: 

Date: 05/20/2019

Rodger A. Dean, Manager  
Airspace Regulations and Policy Group  
Mission Support Services  
Air Traffic Organization  
Federal Aviation Administration

Enclosures:

Enclosure 1: Letter from USAF to FAA, April 23, 2019.

Included with the Letter are the following attachments:

Attachment 1. USAF Playas MOA and Red Flag-Rescue Supplemental Analysis, February 2018

Attachment 2. FAA FONSI, July 2018

Attachment 3. August 2019 Playas Temp MOA Proposal, January 2019

Attachment 4. Red Flag-Rescue Noise Analysis Comparison and Summary, April 2019

Attachment 5. New Mexico SHPO Consultation, March 2019

Enclosure 2: FAA February 28, 2018 FONSI/ROD for USAF May 2018 exercise.

Enclosure 3: USMC SEA for Temporary Activation of Playas Military Operations Area 1, July 2018.