

Navy: More aircraft, flights in plan for Whidbey Air Station, Outlying Field Coupeville

WHIDBEY ISLAND – The Navy is nearing the final step in adding 36 EA-18G Growlers to the 82 based at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island and increasing activity especially at Outlying Field Coupeville, which many expect to increase noise on the North Olympic Peninsula.

The Navy released its final environmental impact statement on Friday, specifying Alternative 2A as its preferred alternative, the same alternative the Navy announced it preferred in June.

No final decision has yet been made, Navy officials said, but no public comment will be taken on the final environmental impact statement (EIS) before the Secretary of the Navy or his representative announce a Record of Decision no earlier than 30 days from the date the document was released.

The transition would begin in 2019 and be completed in 2022, according to Navy spokesmen.

The final EIS includes appendixes with noise studies and the 4,335 public comments received after the draft EIS was released in November 2016. The Navy said the final EIS was updated with new information in light of comments received on the draft document. The final EIS can be found online at <http://whidbeyeis.com/CurrentEISDocuments.aspx>.

Hard copies of the final EIS can be found on the North Olympic Peninsula at Port Townsend Public Library, Sequim and Port Angeles libraries and Jefferson County Library.

In June, Port Townsend Mayor Deborah Stinson expressed disappointment with the Navy's preferred alternative.

"It greatly increases the amount of traffic in Coupeville's Outlying Field," she said then. "This impacts our neighbors on Whidbey, but it also impacts us."

"The noise we hear in Port Townsend is from these takeoffs and landings at this field, typically at night," said Stinson.

The plan was controversial on the Peninsula. The Port Townsend City Council, for instance, sent a letter to the Navy about noise concerns and the Sequim City Council heard concerns from residents.

The Navy says the change is necessary to assure proper training of pilots.

A Central Whidbey Island group, Sound Defense Alliance, plans a community rally from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. Wednesday at the Crockett Barn in Coupeville, according to the Whidbey News-Times. The group wants the Navy to find an alternative site for new planes.

The project has been in the works for years, with environmental assessments prepared in 2005 and 2012 on replacing Prowler aircraft with Growler jets at the naval air station. Preparation of a draft EIS for adding Growler jets to the air station began in 2013.

The Navy's preferred alternative would establish two new expeditionary squadrons and add two aircraft to each squadron that operates off aircraft carriers, increase the airfield operations at both Ault Field at Oak Harbor and Outlying Landing Field (OLF) Coupeville, greatly increasing Field Carrier Landing Practice operations – which includes takeoffs and landings. An operation is defined as a takeoff or landing, so each touch-and-go pass accounts for two operations.

OLF Coupeville would see the greatest increase, supporting 24,100 annual operations, a rise of 17,590 operations per year.

Ault Field would support 88,000 total airfield operations, which represents an increase of 9,800 annual operations over current conditions, the Navy says.

In recent years OLF Coupeville has been used about 90 hours per year, or about 1 percent of the time, the Navy said. The proposal would raise operations at OLF Coupeville to about 360 hours per year, or about 4 percent of the time.

The ratio is flipped, Stinson pointed out in June, saying that under the preferred alternative, 20 percent of the touch-and-go exercises will be held at Ault Field in Oak Harbor; 80 percent will be in Coupeville.

The preferred alternative would place the majority of operations at OLF Coupeville “because OLF Coupeville provides more realistic training for Navy aviators,”the Navy said, pointing out that it sits on a 200-foot ridge surrounded by flat terrain, “similar to the aircraft carrier operating on the water.”

In contrast, the Navy said, “Ault Field sits in a valley surrounded by higher terrain, limiting pattern options and providing a visual picture unlike conditions at sea.”