

RECORD OF DECISION
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT
DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE SPECIAL USE AIRSPACE OPTIMIZATION
HOLLOMAN AIR FORCE BASE, NEW MEXICO

INTRODUCTION

The Department of the Air Force (DAF) is issuing this Record of Decision (ROD) to implement actions to achieve Special Use Airspace (SUA) optimization to support F-16 pilots stationed at Holloman Air Force Base (AFB).

This ROD is based on the Special Use Airspace Optimization Final Environmental Impact Statement (Final EIS), Holloman AFB, New Mexico, February 5, 2021 (Federal Register [FR], Vol. 86, No. 23, page 8356). The decision to achieve SUA optimization considered the information, analysis, and public and other comments contained in the Final EIS, along with other relevant factors.

This ROD is prepared in accordance with the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) at Title 40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Section 1505.2 (*Record of decision in cases requiring environmental impact statements*)¹ and 32 CFR Part 989, implementing the DAF Environmental Impact Analysis Process (EIAP). The DAF is the Lead Agency and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), National Park Service (NPS), and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) are cooperating agencies.

Specifically, this ROD documents the following:

- The DAF's decision;
- The alternatives considered by the DAF in reaching the decision and the alternative considered to be environmentally preferable;
- Relevant factors that were considered among the alternatives and how those factors entered into its decision;
- Whether all practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental impacts resulting from the selected alternative have been adopted, and if not, why they were not; and
- Adoption and summary of a Mitigation Plan and summary of applicable mitigations.

The FAA is responsible for evaluating, processing and charting airspace. The DAF will request FAA, as a Cooperating Agency, to consider and adopt, in whole or in part, the Final EIS as the required NEPA documentation to support FAA decisions on the establishment of SUA. The airspace associated with the Proposed Action and alternatives lies within the jurisdiction of the FAA Albuquerque Air Route Traffic Control Center. Because of their requests and based on their special expertise relating to land managed below the airspace, the National Park Service and the Bureau of Land Management are also cooperating agencies for this proposal.

¹Note: This EIS was ongoing prior to the 14 September 2020 effective date of the CEQ's final rule updating its regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of NEPA. Accordingly, the revised CEQ regulations were not used for this action pursuant to 40 CFR § 1506.13.

DECISION SYNOPSIS

The DAF has selected Alternative 1: Talon Military Operations Area (MOA) which is also the Preferred Alternative. The DAF, by this decision, will request FAA to chart the Talon MOA airspace which would expand the current Talon MOA to the east and increases the low MOA.

The DAF considered four alternatives (as discussed below) to support optimization efforts for aircraft at Holloman AFB. All action alternatives include returning unused SUA back to the National Airspace System (NAS).

BACKGROUND

The 49th Wing, based at Holloman AFB, New Mexico, currently manages and trains in SUA throughout southeastern New Mexico. One of the primary missions at Holloman AFB is to train F-16 pilots. Most of the SUA utilized by Holloman AFB to train F-16 pilots was developed in the 1970s for airframes no longer in the DAF inventory. Since development of the original aircraft, changes in the threat environment and the corresponding changes to tactics, techniques and procedures, F-16 capabilities of weapons, communications, and sensors require training time be devoted to a range of systems. The evolution and development of the F-16 expanded the pilot training and airspace requirements for the aircraft.

While the current Talon MOA is utilized for F-16 training, it does not provide the optimum volume or attributes to satisfy all of the non-hazardous training needs of F-16 pilots.

Optimization of the Talon MOA would improve the training opportunity of F-16 pilots, increase efficiencies, and reduce disruptions to training that currently occur. These training disruptions have resulted in fewer pilots ready for the combat mission.

F-16 pilot training is outlined in Air Force Manual (AFMAN) 11-2F-16, *Flying Operations F-16 Aircrew Training*, addressed in detail in the Final EIS (Page 1-4 thru 1-8, §§1.2.2 - 1.2.4, et seq), and includes: Initial Qualification Training for new F-16 pilots and senior officers; Mission Qualification Training that trains pilots for their specific unit mission; Continuation Training that contains advanced courses; Weapons Employment Qualification that trains pilots in the employment of air-to-surface and air-to-air weapons; and other specialized training. The Formal Training Unit (FTU) at Holloman AFB supports all F-16 pilot training, but Initial Qualification Training constitutes to be the majority.

The training syllabus requires that pilots be trained using a very specific sequence of mission types. This results in limited scheduling flexibility. The required dimensions (area and altitudes) of the SUA are driven by the type of mission being flown and the number of individual aircraft to be flown simultaneously. When airspace appropriate for a specific training mission is not available at the appropriate time during the pilot's training, training is delayed, which disrupts the progress of pilots in training and potentially results in an inability to complete the entire program in a timely manner. This leads to increased training expenses for repeating or delaying a training program. Incomplete training causes reductions in the number of qualified pilots ready to conduct combat operations and degrades mission readiness.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

The DAF considered four alternatives (Final EIS, Vol I, Page 2-22 thru 2-49, §2.8) to support optimization efforts for aircraft at Holloman AFB. All action alternatives include returning unused SUA back to the National Airspace System (NAS).

Alternative 1- Talon MOA. (Final EIS §2.8.1 and Figures 2.8-1, 2.8-2, and 2.8-3)

This alternative expands the current Talon High MOA into three components (A, B, and C), expands the current Talon Low MOA (Low A), and creates an additional low MOA (Low B).

The floor of the low MOAs would be raised to 500 feet above ground level (AGL), from the current 300 feet AGL, and extended up to but not including 12,500 feet mean sea level (MSL). The high MOAs overlie the low MOAs and have a floor of 12,500 feet MSL and extend up to but not including Flight Level (FL) 180 (approximately 18,000 feet MSL).

The existing Talon Air Traffic Control Assigned Airspace (ATCAA) would also be expanded with the same lateral dimensions as the proposed Talon High A, B, and C MOAs. The ATCAA would expand the usable airspace up to but not including FL510 (approximately 51,000 feet MSL) when requested from the FAA and not needed for civilian use. As part of this alternative, the lower portion of the existing Talon Low MOA from 300 to 500 feet AGL, and three other MOAs (Valentine MOA, Bronco 1 MOA, and Bronco 2 MOA) would be returned to the National Airspace System.

F-16 pilot training from Holloman AFB would constitute the majority of operations within the proposed Talon MOA/ATCAA; however, transient military aircraft (not based at Holloman AFB) could schedule and use the airspace as well in accordance with FAA JO 7400.2M. Approximately 10,000 F-16 sorties and 1,000 transient sorties could occur annually within the Talon MOA/ATCAA. The Talon MOA/ATCAA times of use would be changed slightly to align with the existing Holloman AFB operations window of 0700 to 2200 local time, Monday through Friday, and through the Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) process as necessary. The current times of use are sunrise to sunset, Monday through Friday and other times through NOTAM.

F-16 training activity would occur throughout the low and high MOAs, but most of the activity would be in the high MOAs (above 12,500 feet MSL). The F-16 flights would fly supersonic speeds during approximately 1,000 flights annually. All supersonic flights would be limited to FL300 (approximately 30,000 feet MSL) and above in the ATCAAs. Up to 15,360 chaff and 15,360 flares would be released annually during training activities. Chaff are not currently authorized in the Talon MOA, but flares are currently used. Flare use would continue to be subject to existing fire safety restrictions based on the National Fire Danger Rating employed by Holloman AFB. Neither chaff nor flares would be released below 2,000 feet AGL.

Alternative 2 – Cato, Smitty, and Lobos MOAs. (Final EIS §2.8.2 and Figures 2.8-6, 2.8-7, and 2.8-8)

This alternative would reconfigure and expand the existing Cato MOA and the overlying Smitty MOA and the associated ATCAA to the southeast. The floor of these combined MOAs would remain 500 feet AGL and the ceiling would be up to but not including FL180 (approximately 18,000 feet MSL). The overlying ATCAA would extend the training airspace up to but not including FL510 (approximately 51,000 feet above MSL). Alternative 2 also includes the creation of a new MOA, the Lobos MOA, to the south of the proposed Cato and Smitty MOAs. The proposed Lobos MOA would have a floor of 500 feet AGL and a ceiling up to but not

including FL180 (approximately 18,000 feet MSL). The proposed Lobos MOA would also have an ATCAA above the MOA to extend the training airspace up to but not including FL510 (approximately 51,000 feet above MSL).

Two additional ATCAAs (Christa and Kendra) would be established to the east of the proposed Cato, Smitty, and Lobos ATCAAs to serve as a temporary bridge to and from the airspace above White Sands Missile Range (WSMR). The ATCAAs would have a floor of 18,000 feet MSL and a ceiling up to but not including FL510 (approximately 51,000 feet MSL). Reconfiguring the dimensions of the Cato and Smitty MOAs would allow for the northern portion of the MOAs to be returned to the NAS (approximately 900 square nm). Also as part of this alternative, three other MOAs (Valentine MOA, Bronco 1 MOA, and Bronco 2 MOA) would be returned to the NAS.

As with Alternative 1, F-16 pilot training from Holloman AFB would constitute the majority of operations within the proposed MOAs/ATCAAs; however, transient military aircraft (not based at Holloman AFB) could schedule and use the airspace as well in accordance with FAA JO 7400.2M. Approximately 9,100 F-16 sorties and 1,300 transient sorties could occur annually within the Cato, Smitty, and Lobos MOAs/ATCAAs. The times of use would be changed slightly to align with the existing Holloman AFB operations window of 0700 to 2200 local time, Monday through Friday, and through NOTAM as necessary. The current times of use are 0800 to 2200 local time, Monday through Saturday and other times through NOTAM.

F-16 training activity would occur throughout the low and high MOAs, but most of the activity would be in the high MOAs (above 13,500 feet MSL). The F-16 flights would fly supersonic speeds during approximately 1,000 flights. All supersonic flights would be limited to FL300 (approximately 30,000 feet MSL) and above in the ATCAAs. Up to 15,360 chaff and 15,360 flares would be released annually during training activities. Chaff and flares are currently authorized in the Cato MOA. Use of flares would be in accordance with existing fire safety restrictions based on the National Fire Danger Rating employed by Holloman AFB. Neither chaff nor flares would be released below 2,000 feet AGL. Chaff and flares would not be used in the Christa and Kendra ATCAAs.

Alternative 3 - Talon, Cato, Smitty, and Lobos MOAs Combination. (Final EIS §2.8.3 and Figures 2.8-11 and 2.8-12)

This alternative would be a combination of Alternatives 1 and 2 with the following differences. The proposed Talon MOA/ATCAA would be slightly smaller than what is proposed under Alternative 1 and the proposed Lobos MOA would have a floor of 13,500 feet MSL as opposed to the 500 feet AGL proposed under Alternative 2. The times of use would align with the existing Holloman AFB operations window of 0700 to 2200 local time, Monday through Friday, and through NOTAM as necessary. SUA no longer needed by the DAF would be returned to the NAS including the lower portion of the existing Talon Low MOA (300 to 500 feet AGL), the northern portion of the existing Cato and Smitty MOAs, Valentine MOA, Bronco 1 MOA, and Bronco 2 MOA.

The proposed training would be distributed throughout all of the proposed airspace: approximately 6,800 annual sorties would occur in the proposed Talon MOA/ATCAA; and 3,200 annual sorties would occur in the proposed Cato, Smitty, and Lobos MOAs/ATCAAs and the Christa and Kendra ATCAAs. F-16 pilot training from Holloman AFB would constitute the majority of operations within the proposed airspace; however, transient military aircraft (aircraft

not based at Holloman AFB) could schedule and use the airspace as well. For analysis purposes, it is estimated that transient aircraft could conduct 1,300 sorties (700 in the Talon MOA and 600 in the Cato, Smitty and Lobos MOAs) in addition to the Holloman AFB F-16 training sorties. Chaff and flare usage would be approximately 10,752 each annually in the Talon MOA/ATCAA and 4,608 each annually in Cato, Smitty, and Lobos MOAs/ATCAAs.

Alternative 4 – No Action. (Final EIS §2.8.4)

This alternative would not modify any SUA. Training for F-16 aircraft stationed at Holloman AFB would continue to use existing SUA. Existing operations in the Talon, Cato, and Smitty MOAs/ATCAAs, and other MOAs and restricted areas near Holloman AFB would continue (Final EIS §1.2.2; Table 1.2-1, *Airspace Currently Available for F-16 Pilot Training*). The current inefficiencies in accomplishing F-16 pilot training would continue, which would not meet the purpose and need of the proposed action.

ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

Of the alternatives considered in the Final EIS, the No Action Alternative is identified as the environmentally preferable alternative (Final EIS, Page 2-48, §2.8.4). The No Action Alternative represents a comparatively lower impact on various receptors under the airspace since it represents a smaller surface area in square miles under the airspace than the action alternatives and limits the use of chaff and flares.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement was integral to the DAF's development of the Final EIS. The DAF received and considered approximately 17,000 comments (Final EIS, Page 1-9, §1.6), including those received during scoping, at public hearings, and during the public comment period on the Draft EIS. The DAF summarized the substantive comments received during scoping in Final EIS §1.6.1.4. A summary of the substantive comments received on the Draft EIS and DAF responses are provided in the Final EIS (Appendix C, *Draft EIS Public Comment Summary and Responses*). The FAA did not receive any environmental comments from circulating the Talon MOA airspace proposal.

The DAF provided the following public notices, public review periods, and meetings during the EIS process:

- *Notice of Intent*: published August 25, 2017 (Federal Register Vol. 82, No. 164, page 40572-40573).
- *Scoping Period*: initiated August 25, 2017 through September 25, 2017. During this time the DAF held three public meetings in Carlsbad, Las Cruces, and Truth or Consequences, New Mexico.
- *Stakeholder Meetings*: 20 meetings between the DAF, airport representatives, and local governments occurred from October 2017 through June 2018 throughout southern New Mexico.
- *Draft EIS Notice of Availability (NOA)*: published on November 1, 2019 (Federal Register Vol. 84, No. 212, page 58713) with associated media announcements.
- *Public Comment and Review Period*: a public review and comment period for the Draft EIS was initiated on November 1, 2019 with the NOA publication in the Federal Register and scheduled to end on December 9, 2019; however, the comment period was extended

to January 31, 2020 (Federal Register Vol. 84, No. 240, page 68169) resulting in a 91-day review and comment period.

- *Public Hearings*: during the public comment and review period, a total of 8 different hearings were held in the cities of Hobbs, Roswell, Artesia, Carlsbad, Socorro, Truth or Consequences, Silver City, and Las Cruces, New Mexico.
- *Final EIS NOA*: a NOA was published in the Federal Register on February 5, 2021 (Vol. 86, No. 23, EIS No. 20210013, page 8356). This initiated the mandatory 30-day waiting period prior to ROD signature.

After publication of the Final EIS on February 5, 2021 and during the 30-day wait period prior to this ROD being signed, DAF received three unsolicited comments. These comments were fully considered in making the decision herein and have been made a part of the administrative record. The scope of comments received included issues such as noise, wildlife impacts, cumulative impacts, economic impacts, and purpose and need for the action. The comments received were all within the scope of comments the DAF received on the Draft EIS. In summary, one of the comments was determined to be non-substantive as it involved military training routes (MTRs) that did not directly pertain to the proposed action or alternatives. Another simply noted the agency had no comments on the Final EIS. The other involved a compilation of more than twenty comments submitted by the Center for Biological Diversity on behalf of itself and various other non-governmental organizations involving the foregoing issues mostly with respect to Alternatives 2 and 3, while the group simultaneously expressed general support for selection of Alternative 1.

COORDINATION AND CONSULTATION

The DAF consulted and coordinated with federal, state, and local agencies and Native American tribes. The DAF considered all substantive public, agency, and Native American tribal comments received during EIS development. Key consultation and coordination letters are reproduced in the Final EIS (Appendix B, *Interagency Coordination*; Appendix H, *USFWS Consultation Correspondence*; and Appendix J, *Section 106 and Government to Government Consultation*).

In compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), the DAF has completed consultations with the State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPOs) from Arizona and New Mexico, U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, Apache Tribe of Oklahoma, Fort Sill Apache Tribe of Oklahoma, Mescalero Apache Tribe, San Carlos Apache Tribe, White Mountain Apache Tribe, Comanche Nation of Oklahoma, Hopi Tribe, Kiowa Tribe of Oklahoma, Navajo Nation, and the Pueblos of Acoma, Isleta, Laguna, Tesuque, Ysleta del Sur, Zuni, Cochiti, Jemez, Nambe, Ohkay Owingeh, Picuris, Pojoaque, San Felipe, San Idelfonso, Sandia, Santa Ana, Santa Clara, Santo Domingo, Taos, and Zia (refer to Final EIS Appendix J: Government to Government and Section 106 Correspondence).

In compliance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the DAF, as the designated Lead Agency, consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) on the potential effects of the Preferred Alternative to threatened and endangered species. The DAF received concurrence from USFWS (Final EIS, Appendix H, *USFWS Consultation Correspondence*) on the DAF's determination that the Preferred Alternative "may affect, is not likely to adversely affect":

- the endangered Southwestern Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*; flycatcher), and
- the threatened Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*; cuckoo), and
- the threatened Mexican Spotted Owl (*Strix occidentalis lucida*; owl), and
- may affect but is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the Northern Aplomado Falcon (*Falco femoralis septentrionalis*; falcon) which is considered a nonessential experimental population under section 10(j) of the ESA.

These findings are contained in the Final EIS (§4.5.1.3) and Final EIS, Appendix H, *USFWS Consultation Correspondence* (USFWS letter dated 17 April 2020).

MITIGATION

The DAF has developed non-discretionary mitigations to address concerns expressed in comments provided by the public and governmental agencies. These mitigations were presented in the Final EIS (Page 7-2, §7.2). All mitigations identified in the Final EIS will be implemented and included in a post-ROD Mitigation Plan.

Mitigation by avoidance is achieved by having been incorporated into Alternative 1 as part of the airspace proposal and will, therefore, be implemented automatically as part of the FAA airspace approval and charting process.

Compliance laws and regulations administered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and other regulatory and/or state environmental quality agencies are mandated and some have mitigating effects. These laws and regulations are not considered discretionary with respect to USAF decision making and will be implemented.

To track non-discretionary mitigations the USAF will develop a Mitigation Plan within 90 days of the signature of this ROD that identifies principal and subordinate organizations with responsibility for oversight and execution of these specific actions. In no case will an impact-inducing action be taken or implemented prior to the applicable mitigation measure (defined below) being funded and put in place.

The Mitigation Plan will include, but not be limited to, the following:

- Identification of the specific non-discretionary actions;
- Identification of the responsible organization for each action; and
- Timing for execution of the actions.

Mitigations are divided into three groups to reflect when they will take effect. Group 1 mitigations are mitigations by avoidance and constitute modifications to the structure of the airspace that are reflected in the Preferred Alternative, Alternative 1, and will be implemented automatically as part of the FAA aeronautical approval process. Group 2 mitigations will be implemented by agreed upon dates between FAA and the DAF, allowing for a reasonable time to procure and install the equipment if the equipment is determined to be necessary as a result of the FAA analysis. Group 3 mitigations will be implemented when the airspace is being used. All mitigations will be further described in the Mitigation Plan to be implemented in conjunction with airspace use once airspace is approved and published.

All mitigations will be tracked and coordinated through identified agencies of responsibility, updated, and adjusted to accomplish and meet the intent of the mitigation. Mitigation includes:

Group 1

- Southern boundary of the Talon MOA was adjusted to the north so that:
 - The boundary is four nautical miles from the centerline of the ATS route J66 to eliminate conflict with general aviation along this route.
 - The MOA will not overlap the northern boundary of Carlsbad Caverns National Park.
- Vertical obstructions that intrude into the 500-foot AGL floor of the proposed Talon Low A and B MOAs would be identified on aeronautical charts. Known obstructions include one tower on the edge of Low A and three towers beneath Low B as shown in Final EIS, Appendix I (Figure 2-1).
- The boundaries of the Talon Low A and B MOAs were modified during the proposal to:
 - Avoid conflicts with the approach/departure of Artesia Municipal Airport and Cavern City Air Terminal Airport.
 - Maintain a north-south corridor between Carlsbad and Roswell for general aviation operating below 12,500 feet MSL.

Group 2

- The DAF would pay to improve FAA communication infrastructure to support air traffic control radio coverage of the Talon Low MOA area if the equipment is determined to be necessary as a result of FAA aeronautical study.

Group 3

- The Talon High C MOA and Bronco 3 MOA would not be activated at the same time to maintain one of the approach corridors to Roswell International Airport.
- A record of the amount and type of deployed chaff used in the optimized airspace will be maintained at Holloman AFB for up to six years, or until it is determined that such records are no longer needed.
- Since there are numerous DAF installations in southern New Mexico using training airspace, in an effort to streamline the complaint process for the public, the DAF has made arrangements that any complaints concerning aircraft overflights, chaff, and flares in areas east of WSMR (to include the Talon MOA) should be sent to the Holloman AFB Public Affairs Office:

Holloman AFB Public Affairs

Website: <https://www.holloman.af.mil/Contact-Us/>

Telephone number: 575.572.7381

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

All practicable means to mitigate impacts associated with the decision have been adopted. However, some impacts cannot be avoided, and could be perceived as adverse or annoying to affected individuals.

Noise associated with the use of the low MOAs will result in short-term reactions of wildlife or livestock and could include temporary shifts in habitat use or activity (Final EIS §4.5.1). USFWS provided their concurrence with impacts to protected species in a letter dated April 17, 2020 (Final EIS Appendix H, *USFWS Consultation Correspondence*). Observers on the ground could

also be annoyed by the noise and presence of military aircraft, particularly if in an outdoor recreational area (Final EIS §4.3.1 and §4.7.1).

Expanding the Talon MOA/ATCAA will have minor impacts to some civil aviation (Final EIS §4.2.1, and Appendix D §D2.3). Existing Air Traffic Service routes (V-291, V-83, V-68, and V-102 in the MOAs; J-108, Q-20, Q-37, and J-15 in the ATCAAs) pass through the SUA and the air traffic operating under Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) will have to deviate around the MOAs/ATCAAs when they are active. With the exception of V-291 which occurs in both the Low B and High B MOAs, these routes occur in the high MOAs and ATCAAs. If the Talon low MOAs are not active, the civil aviation traffic along these routes could remain below 12,500 feet MSL and pass beneath the MOA. Alternatively, if the ATCAAs are not active the traffic that is able to fly above FL180 can pass over the active MOA. If traffic is not able to pass over or under the active MOA, it will have to deviate around the MOAs. The deviation will increase the travel time for civil aviation from 1 to 9 minutes, depending on the origin and destination of the flight. This impact will only occur during times when the MOAs are active.

No irreversible or irretrievable effects are expected for cultural or natural resources. Impacts to natural resources could occur in the unlikely event of an accident and/or fire. However, while any fire can have short-term impacts to agricultural resources, wildlife, and habitat, the fire's effects are not irreversible in a natural environment.

DECISION

After considering the potential environmental consequences of the proposed actions; comments and concerns from the public, regulatory and other agencies, Native American Tribes and other key stakeholders; as well as other factors related to national defense, current military operational needs and other issues addressed in the Final EIS; the DAF has decided to select the Preferred Alternative, Alternative 1, and adopt the mitigation as discussed above. The DAF will request FAA take those actions necessary to implement this decision by modifying and establishing the requisite airspace.

ROBERT E. MORIARTY, P.E., SES
Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Air Force
(Installations)

Date