

**DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY
U.S FLEET FORCES COMMAND**

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT/FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT HARM
FOR PROPOSED CARRIER STRIKE GROUP JOINT TASK FORCE EXERCISE IN
JULY 2008 (CSG JTFEX JUL 2008)**

Pursuant to Council on Environmental Quality Regulations (40 CFR Parts 1500-1508) implementing the procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act, and in accordance with Executive Order (EO) 12114, *Environmental Effects Abroad of Major Federal Actions* and the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Instruction (OPNAVINST) 5090.1C, the Navy gives notice that a combined Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)/Finding of No Significant Harm (FONSH) has been issued for the Carrier Strike Group Joint Task Force Exercise (CSG JTFEX (Jul 2008)). This combined FONSI/FONSH is based on analysis contained in a Comprehensive Environmental Assessment (EA) for Major Atlantic Fleet Training Exercises on the East and Gulf Coasts of the U.S. (February 2006), a Comprehensive Overseas EA (OEA) for Major Atlantic Fleet Training Exercises in Operating Areas (OPAREAs) 12 nautical miles (NM) and seaward off the East and Gulf Coasts of the U.S (February 2006), a Supplement to the Comprehensive OEA (SOEA) (April 2008), and a National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) Biological Opinion (BO) for 2008 Major Atlantic Fleet Training Exercises (14 April 2008). The FONSI for the Comprehensive EA for Major Atlantic Fleet Training Exercises was issued on February 10, 2006. A FONSH was signed for the Comprehensive OEA on 10 February 2006. An Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and/or an Overseas EIS (OEIS) are not required for the proposed CSG JTFEX (Jul 2008).

Major Atlantic Fleet training exercises are designed to closely approximate the emerging threats and operational conditions that U.S. Armed Forces and Allied partners could encounter during forward-deployed operations around the world. Major exercises include Carrier Strike Group Joint Task Force Exercises (CSG JTFEXs), Carrier Strike Group Composite Training Unit Exercises (CSG COMPTUEXs), Expeditionary Strike Group Composite Training Unit Exercises (ESG COMPTUEXs), and Combined CSG COMPTUEX/JTFEXs. The purpose of these exercises is to certify naval forces as combat-ready. The Navy needs to train to deploy combat-ready forces as mandated by 10 U.S.C. 5062. The CSG and ESG, which make up our forward-deployed naval forces, are fundamental elements of the U.S. strategic posture. These forces must be well trained to respond, at minimal personal risk to sailors and marines, to the myriad of tasks that might confront them.

The Navy proposes to conduct CSG JTFEX (Jul 2008) over a ten day period during the month of July 2008. Specific training activities associated with CSG JTFEX (Jul 2008) include air-to-ground (ATG) bombing, Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR), Maritime Interdiction Operations (MIO), Inert Naval Gunfire, Fast Attack Craft/Fast Inshore Attack Craft (FAC/FIAC), and Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW). Shore events include ATG bombing occurring on Avon Park Air Force Range, Florida, Pinycastle Impact Range, Florida, and CSAR over Rodman Ordnance Range, Florida. Near shore events (< 12 NM) include MIO within the Jacksonville (JAX) OPAREA. At-sea events (> 12 NM) include Inert Naval Gunfire, MIO, and FAC/FIAC within the JAX OPAREA and ASW within the Charleston (CHASN) OPAREA.

The Comprehensive EA for Major Atlantic Fleet Training Exercises made an overall impact assessment for each of the major training exercise types and concluded that the conduct of major Atlantic Fleet training exercises will not have significant effects on the quality of the human environment given that: these training exercises are similar in nature, scope and intensity to past major training exercises; past major exercises have not shown a significant impact on the environment either individually or cumulatively; and effective and robust mitigation measures are routinely implemented. Consistent with past practices, the Navy may conduct up to six major Atlantic Fleet training exercises annually. Specific training activities evaluated in the Comprehensive EA included ATG bombing, helicopter events, combat search and rescue (CSAR), amphibious operations, SFCP training, and mine warfare.

The Comprehensive EA evaluated areas where major Atlantic Fleet exercises would occur on land and in waters from the shoreline to 12 NM. The east coast land training areas include BT-9 Target/BT-11 Range, North Carolina; Navy Dare County Range, North Carolina; Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, North Carolina; Townsend Range, Georgia; Pinecastle Impact Range, Florida; Avon Park Range, Florida; and Eglin AFB, Florida. The East and Gulf Coasts in-water training areas include the Virginia Capes (VACAPES), CHPT, CHASN, JAX, and Eastern Gulf of Mexico (GOMEX) OPAREAs.

Environmental concerns addressed in the Comprehensive EA included land use, community facilities, coastal zone management, socioeconomics, cultural resources, airspace, air quality, noise, geology, soils, water resources, biological resources, munitions and hazardous materials management, and safety. Mitigation measures identified in the Comprehensive EA that are applicable to operations proposed during CSG JTFEX (Jul 2008) will be implemented. Specifically, mitigation measures for ATG bombing will be followed in order to minimize any potential for environmental impacts. In addition, all aircraft operations and ordnance use will be consistent with existing range manuals and related environmental documents as incorporated in the Comprehensive EA. The Comprehensive EA did not analyze the potential impacts from MIO training within 12 NM that are planned for CSG JTFEX (Jul 2008). However, analysis from the Comprehensive OEA was applied for the near-shore MIO events since the operations, OPAREAs, and species analyzed are equivalent.

In alignment with the Comprehensive EA, the Comprehensive OEA assessed the overall impact of up to six major Atlantic Fleet training exercises annually. The Comprehensive OEA made an overall impact assessment for each of the major training exercise types and concluded that given these training exercises are similar in nature, scope and intensity to past major training exercises, and given that effective and robust mitigation measures are routinely implemented, these exercises have not individually or cumulatively shown significant harm to the natural resources of the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Therefore, the Comprehensive OEA concluded that the conduct of major Atlantic Fleet training exercises are not expected to cause any significant harm to the natural resources of the U.S. EEZ, impact listed species or marine mammals or adversely affect essential fish habitat (EFH). Specific training activities evaluated in the Comprehensive OEA included Air-to-Surface (ATS) bombing, Naval Gunfire, MIO, Torpedo Exercise (TORPEX), FAC/FIAC, CSAR, Air-to-Air Missile Exercises (MISSILEXs), Mine Warfare, and ASW.

The Comprehensive OEA evaluated potential impacts that may occur at-sea, 12 NM or more from the East Coast of the U.S. and the Gulf of Mexico in the VACAPES, CHPT, CHASN, JAX and GOMEX OPAREAs. Environmental concerns addressed in the Comprehensive OEA

include impacts to: the physical environment; fish and Essential Fish Habitat (EFH); sea turtles and marine mammals; seabirds and migratory birds; endangered and threatened species; cultural resources; and socioeconomics.

Three alternatives were considered in both the Comprehensive EA and OEA for Major Atlantic Fleet Training Exercises including: (1) No Action, (2) Conduct Major Atlantic Fleet Training Exercises along the East Coast of the U.S. and Gulf of Mexico (preferred alternative), and (3) Conduct Major Atlantic Fleet Training Exercises in the Cherry Point (CHPT) OPAREA only. Alternatives (2) and (3) met all of the project criteria. Alternative (1) would not allow the Navy to train for combat and therefore did not meet the mandate in 10 U.S.C. 5062. Alternative (2) was identified as the preferred alternative because it gives the Navy the greatest flexibility and number of available land ranges and OPAREAs to accommodate all of the land-based training components as well as the number of participants involved with a major Atlantic Fleet training exercise. Alternative (3) meets all of the criteria needed to satisfy 10 U.S.C. 5062 requirements, but would limit the Navy's flexibility to conduct major Atlantic Fleet training exercises.

The SOEA provided a quantitative acoustic effect analysis for use of mid-frequency active (MFA) sonar that could occur during four major Atlantic Fleet training exercises scheduled during spring, summer, and winter 2008. Four major exercises were analyzed in the SOEA which include a spring CSG COMPTUEX/JTFEX, summer ESG COMPTUEX, summer CSG JTFEX, and winter CSG COMPTUEX/JTFEX.

The SOEA evaluated potential impacts that may occur at-sea, 12 NM or more from the East Coast of the U.S. and the Gulf of Mexico in the VACAPES, CHPT, CHASN, JAX and GOMEX OPAREAs. Environmental concerns addressed in the SOEA include impacts to: the physical environment; fish and Essential Fish Habitat (EFH); sea turtles and marine mammals; seabirds and migratory birds; endangered and threatened species; cultural resources; and socioeconomics.

Both the Comprehensive OEA and SOEA analyzed marine species occurrence and distribution for the proposed exercise area. For ASW events, the SOEA included a quantitative analysis of potential acoustic effects from the use of MFA sonar. Sea turtles and marine mammals, including Endangered Species Act (ESA)-listed species, were included in this quantitative assessment.

For sea turtles, the SOEA concluded that deployment of sonobuoys may effect, but are not likely to adversely affect sea turtle species due to potential entanglement or ingestion as a result of the four proposed exercise training events. However, the BO (14 April 2008) concluded that sea turtle species may be adversely affect, but are not likely to be jeopardized. Consistent with the finding of the Comprehensive OEA, MFA sonar is not expected to affect sea turtles because of MFA sonar is above the hearing range of sea turtles, which is limited to low frequencies. Acoustic modeling for the summer CSG JTFEX (Jul 2008) estimated potential effects to marine mammals. Non-ESA-Listed marine mammals include minke whale, pygmy and dwarf sperm whales, beaked whales, rough-toothed dolphins, bottlenose dolphins, pantropical spotted dolphins, Atlantic spotted dolphins, Clymene dolphins, common dolphins, Risso's dolphins, and pilot whales. ESA-Listed marine mammals include the sperm whale. The potential acoustic exposures that were estimated are behavioral effects that are non-injurious (Level B harassment). Although sperm whales may exhibit a reaction when initially exposed to active acoustic energy, scientific literature reporting on field observations indicate the effects would not be long term,

and any potential exposures are not expected to be significant. No injury, serious injury or mortality is anticipated.

Because SOEA acoustic modeling indicated potential effects to ESA-listed marine mammals, the Navy initiated consultation procedures under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) with NMFS for the Atlantic Fleet major training exercises scheduled during spring, summer, and winter 2008. As a result of the consultation, NMFS provided the Navy with a Biological Opinion (BO) and Incidental Take Statement (ITS) on 14 April 2008. The BO concludes that the Navy's proposed 2008 Atlantic Fleet Training Exercises may adversely affect, but is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of these threatened and endangered species under NMFS' jurisdiction. Additionally, NMFS concluded that because critical habitat that has been designated for endangered or threatened species under NMFS' jurisdiction is not likely to be exposed to the direct or indirect effects of the proposed training exercises, the proposed exercises are not likely to adversely affect designated critical habitat and, as a result, are not likely to destroy or adversely modify that critical habitat. In addition, the BO and ITS estimates the number of times whales might be exposed to mid-frequency sonar greater than 173 dB are 2 fin whales, 482 humpback whales, 1 North Atlantic right whale, 2 sei whales, and 281 sperm whales. The BO and ITS also includes mandatory mitigation measures for the protection of listed species that will be implemented during CSG JTFEX (Jul 2008).

In January 2007, the Deputy Secretary of Defense implemented a two-year National Defense Exemption (NDE) from the requirements of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) for Department of Defense (DoD) MFA sonar activities associated with military readiness. The ASW events that are planned for CSG JTFEX (Jul 2008) are military readiness activities and are, therefore, subject to this exemption. The exemption includes mandatory mitigation measures that must be implemented during the two-year exemption period for all military readiness activities that involve the use of MFA sonar. The implementation of these mitigation measures, as coordinated with NMFS, will result in the proposed exercise having the least practicable adverse impact on marine mammal species or stocks.

Mitigation measures identified in the Comprehensive OEA and SOEA that relate to operations proposed during CSG JTFEX (Jul 2008) shall be implemented. Specifically, general maritime mitigation measures, which include those identified in the Comprehensive OEA, will be implemented for this exercise. Given these protective measures, collisions with marine mammals or sea turtles are not expected. Finally, mitigation measures related to use of MFA sonar during ASW training, as specified by the MMPA NDE and the NMFS BO for 2008 Major Atlantic Fleet Training Exercises, will be followed in order to minimize the potential for environmental impacts. An exercise-specific measure that restricts the area where mid-frequency active sonar is used will also be implemented.

Exercise planners and participants will be made aware of all monitoring and mitigation measures that apply to CSG JTFEX (Jul 2008) as identified in the Comprehensive EA, the Comprehensive OEA, the SOEA, NMFS BO, and ITS. These measures will be promulgated to all participants as mandatory requirements.

The Navy finds that the proposed CSG JTFEX (Jul 2008) is consistent with the training evaluated in the Comprehensive EA, Comprehensive OEA and SOEA and with past training and environmental documentation. Accordingly, the Navy finds that conducting CSG JTFEX (Jul

2008) will not significantly impact listed ESA species or marine mammals, harm the environment, or adversely affect Essential Fish Habitat.

The Comprehensive OEA and SOEA addressing this action are on file and may be reviewed by interested parties at the place of origin: Commander, Naval Facilities Engineering Command Atlantic, 6506 Hampton Blvd, Norfolk, VA 23508 (ATTN: Ms. Erin Swiader, Code EV21ES), telephone (757) 322-4960. A limited number of copies of the OEAs are available to fill single-copy requests.

2 July 2008
Dated

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