

FINAL FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)
ARMY NATIONAL GUARD
Development and Operation of a Limited Army Aviation Support Facility
Billings, Montana

Introduction

The Montana Army National Guard (MTARNG) prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) to identify and evaluate potential effects of operating a Limited Army Aviation Support Facility (LAASF) at a new location from an existing hangar in Eastern Montana. MTARNG seeks to expand aviation capabilities to the eastern portion of Montana to better increase soldier training and to support the community by having aviation assets more readily available in that geographic region. The EA has been prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) (42 United States Code 4321 et seq.), the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) Regulations Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] Parts 1500-1508), and 32 CFR Part 651 (*Environmental Analysis of Army Actions*, Final Rule).

Per 10 United States Code (USC) § 10501, the National Guard Bureau (NGB) is a joint activity of the Department of Defense (DoD) and is responsible for ensuring that ARNG activities are performed in accordance with applicable policies and regulations. NGB is the lead federal agency for MTARNG NEPA actions. NGB is ultimately responsible for NEPA compliance; however, MTARNG has local responsibility for NEPA document preparation and public outreach.

1. Description of the Proposed Action and Alternatives

Proposed Action – The MTARNG’s Proposed Action is to operate an LAASF in Eastern Montana. The MTARNG’s preferred alternative is to operate from a 12,000 square foot hangar in Billings that MTARNG currently leases. The hangar is located immediately adjacent to the Billings Logan International Airport which has approach control (including air traffic control [ATC] tower), fire and rescue services, and radar for safety during training, runway access, and utilities. A hangar with sufficient capacity for up to six (6) aircraft would fulfill MTARNG’s short-term needs (approximately 5 to 10 years). The MTARNG would begin operations at the new LAASF in FY 2023 and operate with federal funding once the environmental clearance is approved.

The LAASF would support up to six helicopters (including but not limited to the Chinook [CH-47], Blackhawk [UH-60], and Lakota [UH-72]). Flights would occur primarily during the day, with approximately three (3) percent returning after dark.

Alternatives Considered - During the initial alternatives development, MTARNG considered six locations: Billings, Glasgow, Glendive, Laurel, Lewistown, and Miles City. Glasgow, Glendive, and Lewistown were eliminated because of their rural setting, few to no local MTARNG aviation soldiers and, in the case of Glasgow, the amount of aviation coverage that would be provided. Three locations—Billings, Laurel, and Miles City—were carried forward for more detailed screening.

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The MTARNG's three alternatives were screened based on six screening criteria. These include:

- 1) capability to provide aviation coverage for the identified "coverage gap" in Montana
- 2) adjacency to an airport with related services
- 3) ability to accommodate up to six aircraft with room for future expansion to provide classroom and office space (no more than 6 aircraft would be stationed at the facility)
- 4) greater distance to potential noise receptors
- 5) size of the nearby population base/economy
- 6) proximity to MTARNG training areas

The Proposed Action is the only alternative that met all six screening requirements and fulfills the purpose and need of this project. The Laurel and Miles City alternatives were dismissed from further analysis. The No Action Alternative failed to meet all the screening criteria, but as required by NEPA, was retained in the analysis and provides a basis of comparison.

2. Environmental Analysis

The potential environmental impacts associated with the Proposed Action are fully described in the EA. The EA identifies the environmental resources that could be affected by the Proposed Action, and determines the significance of the impacts, if any, to each of these resources. Based on the EA's analysis, the MTARNG determined that the potential adverse impacts from the Proposed Action on land use, air quality, climate change/greenhouse gases, noise, biological resources, water resources, socioeconomics and safety, infrastructure, environmental justice, and hazardous and toxic materials and wastes would not be significant. The Proposed Action would not result in any disproportionate adverse impacts on minority or low-income populations or result in adverse health or safety risks to children. There would be a minor increase in noise, but noise levels would be below federal noise thresholds for significant impact and all federal, state, and local noise regulations would be met.

3. Best Management Practices and Mitigation

The MTARNG will employ Best Management Practices (BMPs) to minimize potential minor adverse environmental impacts and maintain good stewardship. These BMPs would be implemented as appropriate for the proposed improvements and include measures that minimize vehicle emissions, water pollution, and contamination of land or water. No mitigation measures are required for the Proposed Action because no potentially significant adverse impacts were identified.

4. Regulations

The Proposed Action complies with NEPA, the CEQ Regulations and 32 CFR Part 651 *Environmental Analysis of Army Actions*.

5. Commitment to Implementation

The National Guard Bureau (NGB) and MTARNG affirm their commitment to implement this EA in accordance with NEPA. Implementation is dependent on funding. The MTARNG and the

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Army National Guard's G-9 Directorate will ensure that adequate funds are requested in future years' budgets to achieve the goals and objectives set forth in this EA.

6. Public Review and Comment

An opportunity for agency and public input on the Draft EA was provided during the 30-day public comment period from April 18 to May 19, 2022. Notice of Availability (NOA) announcing the Draft EA availability was published in the *Billings Gazette* and via e-mail notification by the *Billings Gazette* on Sunday, April 17, 2022. MTARNG received nine comments. These comments included concern about helicopter noise in the surrounding neighborhoods, traffic on Highway 3, future MTARNG development on the adjacent parcel, and cultural resources. A comment matrix with the comments received and the MTARNG's responses are attached to this document. Within these comments was a request for a public meeting. As a result, a MTARNG conducted a public meeting on June 29, 2022, at the Boothill Inn and Suites at 242 East Airport Road, Billings, MT 59105. The meeting was held in an open house format where participants could interact directly with the MTARNG project team to ask questions and obtain additional information. Comment forms were also available, and two comments were received.

The Final EA and Draft FONSI are available for a 30-day public review and comment period following publication a public notice in the *Billings Gazette*. The comment period ran from 20 November 2022 until 20 December 2022.

7. Finding of No Significant Impact

After careful review of the EA, I have concluded that implementation of the Proposed Action would not generate controversy or have a significant adverse impact on the quality of the human or natural environment. This analysis fulfills the requirements of NEPA and the CEQ regulations. An Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared, and the NGB is issuing this Final FONSI.

Date

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