

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Name of Action: Laughlin Air Force Base Digital Airport Surveillance Radar

The Department of Defense (DoD) proposes to construct a Digital Airport Surveillance Radar (DASR) at Laughlin Air Force Base (AFB) in Del Rio, Texas. This proposed action is part of the DoD National Airspace System (NAS) Program, which involves the replacement of analog air traffic control systems with state-of-the-art digital air traffic control equipment on U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, and U.S. Air Force (USAF) bases throughout the country. These radars are also being installed at commercial airports under the authority of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA); environmental review at FAA airfields is being conducted separately. The implementation of the NAS program at DoD bases was previously evaluated in a programmatic Environmental Assessment (EA) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) (1995), which fully detailed the need for the program and committed to completing site-specific National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documentation tiered from the programmatic EA for individual NAS sites.

The EA prepared for Laughlin AFB addresses the site-specific impacts of locating a DASR (specifically an ASR-11) at the base, and evaluates the consequences of the DASR construction on both the natural and human-made environments. The DASR at Laughlin AFB is needed to replace the existing Airport Surveillance Radar (AN/GPN-12), which was installed in 1977. The proposed DASR will improve system reliability, provide additional weather data, reduce maintenance cost, improve performance, and provide digital data input to a proposed new digital automation system air traffic controller displays.

The programmatic EA and FONSI conducted in 1995 determined that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) was not necessary, and therefore was not prepared. Furthermore, it has been determined that an EIS is not necessary for this tiered EA prepared for Laughlin AFB, and no EIS will be prepared.

Three alternative sites were evaluated from seven candidate sites considered for location of the DASR. All three sites have similar existing environmental conditions for most of the parameters evaluated in the EA, and thus short-term construction and long-term operation impacts are similar for all three sites. All of the sites are located in areas designated as open space. All of the sites are characterized by similar socioeconomic, noise, geologic, hydrologic, biologic, and aesthetic conditions. The sites are located in upland areas vegetated with scrub and grasslands, and are characterized by well-drained soils and deep water tables. Wildlife use of each of the three sites is anticipated to be minimal due to the poor quality of the habitat available at the sites and the close proximity of human activity. No surface water resources or wetlands and no known threatened or endangered species are present at any of the sites. The baseline aesthetic values of the sites are similar; addition of an ASR-11 would be consistent with the aesthetic values of the base in each case. No significant differences in electromagnetic effects are expected. Construction at any of the sites would result in no contact with groundwater, and the

consequences of construction at all of the sites would be the same in regard to hazardous materials.

The three alternative sites are at various distances from existing electric, telephone, and data communication lines, and from existing roads. Site 1 is generally the closest to existing utilities; Site 4 is somewhat more distant; and Site 7 is the furthest, especially for data communication lines. The longer length of trench required for conduits would lead to potentially greater impacts on adjacent land uses, due to increased dust and noise levels.

Another difference among the three alternatives is that there is a possibility of encountering archaeological resources while excavating for the fiber-optic cable conduit, in the event that Site 7 is selected. No cultural resources are expected to be encountered during ASR-11 construction at either Site 1 or Site 4.

The same intensity and type of construction would be utilized to install the DASR facility, regardless of which site is chosen. While no significant impacts have been identified for any of the alternative sites, it is anticipated that construction of the ASR-11 at Site 7 would result in somewhat greater impacts than either Site 1 or Site 4, due to the distance to utility connections and the proximity to existing cultural resources.

No long term impacts associated with the operation of a DASR facility are anticipated, regardless of which site is chosen. The existing characteristics of the natural and human environments at the sites are similar at Sites 1, 4, and 7. The radar would generate radio frequency radiation (RFR) while operating. However, the RFR generated would be below the maximum permissible exposure (MPE) level for the general population at ground level. Since warning signs would be placed at the perimeter of the facility, and since the sites are located in fairly remote locations on the base, the RFR generated from the radar is not anticipated to pose a harm to the general population. During the DASR operation, fuel and other hazardous materials, such as engine oil and grease, may be used at the site. However, use and disposal of any hazardous materials would occur in compliance with Laughlin AFB protocols and guidelines as well as applicable state and federal regulations. Consequently, it is anticipated that operational use of hazardous materials will not adversely affect the natural or human environments.

In summary, construction and operation of the ASR-11 facility at Laughlin AFB would result in minimal short-term and long-term impacts, regardless of which of the three alternative sites is selected as the preferred location. The USAF has identified Site 4 as the preferred location for the DASR facility; however, both Sites 1 and 4 would be acceptable locations for the ASR-11 facility from an environmental perspective. Site 7 is somewhat less preferable due to the greater impacts that could result from the more extensive utility construction and utility construction adjacent to sensitive archaeological area.

It is anticipated that few mitigation measures would be required during construction and operation of the facility. During the construction period, sheeting or supports may be used in the areas excavated for the antenna foundation and utility trenches in order to prevent collapse of these excavated areas. To minimize noise impacts during construction, mufflers would be used on construction equipment and vehicles. In addition, all equipment and vehicles used during construction would be maintained in good operating condition so that emissions are minimized, thus reducing the potential for air quality impacts. Dust will be controlled on-site by using water to wet down disturbed areas. The small area (0.45-acre) that will be permanently cleared for the DASR facility would be covered with a geotextile fabric and crushed stone to stabilize the disturbed soils, in order to minimize the potential for erosion and sedimentation. All hazardous materials used during construction would be used and disposed of in accordance with Laughlin AFB policies and protocols and all applicable state and federal regulations. Traffic management measures will be developed to ensure traffic flow and pedestrian access is maintained.

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 Date