
File Code: 1950
Date: May 18, 2016

Designated Opportunity to Comment on the High Altitude Mountain Environment Training Strategy (HAMETS) Helicopter Operations Project

Dear Forest Stakeholder:

The Lincoln National Forest is proposing to authorize the United States Army Garrison Fort Bliss and the 1st Armored Division Combat Aviation Brigade (1 AD CAB) to conduct High Altitude Mountain Environment Training Strategy (HAMETS) helicopter operations, including the use of helicopter landing zones on National Forest System lands. Recent high altitude operations during military conflicts and mercy missions resulted in accidents that involved loss of life and equipment. The purpose of the project is to provide high altitude training in a mountain environment with varied terrain that is not available within either Fort Bliss or White Sands Missile Range (WSMR) military installations. The project area includes multiple locations across the Sacramento Ranger District on the Lincoln National Forest (Figure 1).

This project announcement letter serves to initiate scoping, “an early and open process for determining the scope of issues to be addressed” (40 CFR 1501.7). Scoping is not limited to a single point in time; we will continue to accept and consider comments until an implementation decision is made. The purpose of scoping is to provide an opportunity for the public to provide early and meaningful comments on a proposed action prior to a decision being made by the responsible official. Public comments received in response to this solicitation will help the responsible official identify issues to be addressed in the environmental analysis for this proposal.

Background

In 2012, the Forest Service granted a short-term permit authorizing HAMETS training at five helicopter landing zones (HLZs) on the Lincoln National Forest. This training was conducted safely and without incident or apparent public disturbance.

Description of Proposed Actions

The current proposal is a continuation and expansion of previously-authorized HAMETS activities. Under the proposed action, up to 18 HLZs would be utilized for HAMETS helicopter operations at various locations on the Sacramento Ranger District (Figure 1). Additionally, staging at the Alamogordo White Sands Regional and Truth or Consequences airports would be considered to more efficiently access the landing zones on the Lincoln National Forest and remote areas of the installations. HAMETS activities would be split evenly between day and night operations and follow timing restrictions required by applicable laws, regulations, and



policies.

In addition to federal environmental laws, and Forest Service policies, all HAMETS training would be conducted in accordance with training requirements for mountainous environments as stated in Army Training Circular 3-04.11; aviation rules per Army Regulation 95-1; and standard HAMETS protocols.

The following parameters were used by the Army to identify potential HLZ sites within the forest. Preferred HLZ locations would:

- Be located at varying altitudes; greater than 6,000 feet above mean sea level (AMSL), but preferably in the range of 7,000 feet AMSL to 10,000 feet AMSL to provide for realistic training;
- Have topography characterized by ridge lines (pinnacles) or forested canyons (confined);
- Have a land grade of less than 15 percent (for touch and go and emergency landing purposes);
- Be sized so that at least one helicopter can use the area safely; and
- Have a clear area for an HLZ confined by natural features such as trees or terrain.

Forest sites that are confined with dense vegetation or tall trees challenge a pilot's ability to navigate, locate, and track HLZs as they maneuver between sites, perform approach tactics, and land the aircraft. In addition to training for changes in aircraft performance, pilots must train in a variety of landing zones presenting differing topographical situations, weather (snow), and elevations, to effectively conduct HAMETS training. HLZs used for training also require topography that will allow a helicopter to land in the event of an emergency. This would enhance the 1 AD CAB HAMETS training capabilities at the individual crew (two aircraft) or team (three aircraft) level as well as, on occasion, the unit level with several teams of two or more helicopters training at once.

If all 18 HLZs are approved for HAMETS training and there would be on average 110 hours of training, each would see an average of about six hours per year of helicopter activity. However, seasonal restrictions may require that some HLZs be used more than others. The CAB would annually conduct 60% (994 landings) within Fort Bliss/WSMR airspace and 40% (662 landings) in the Lincoln National Forest.

A HAMETS training event usually consists of two helicopters flying together to a selected United States Forest Service approved HLZ for use on that particular training day. Typically, aviators would circle a specific HLZ or approach from several directions to familiarize the pilot on HLZ conditions, especially those related to wind direction, intensity, and shear, and to check for people and/or livestock on the HLZ. Each helicopter would conduct from 3 to 6 landings depending on whether it originated from Biggs AAF or from Alamogordo-White Sands Regional Airport (KALM). Flights in and out of KALM would be conducted to the south west of Highway 54 to minimize noise issues, then east towards the Lincoln National Forest. Approaches to HLZs can range from 2 to 50 degree approach angle. As an aircraft nears a forest HLZ, aviators would

begin the following descent patterns into the HLZ for the safest operation: a) between 1,000 m and 500 m from the HLZ, helicopters will descend from the 2,000 ft. above ground level (AGL) to no lower than 500 ft. AGL; b) within 500 m of the HLZ helicopters will fly below 500 ft. AGL as required to conduct training. Transition to an HLZ over 1,000 m away from the first HLZ trained on would be at 2,000 ft. AGL, and no lower than 500 ft. AGL to HLZs closer than 1,000 m from HLZ first trained on. HLZs within 500m of Mexican Spotted Owl Protected Activity centers will not be utilized for HAMETS training during the 1 March to 30 August time period. Since each landing takes about 10 minutes, a team of helicopters may be over an HLZ for about 30 to 60 minutes. If fuel allows, the senior trainer may direct HAMETS Aviators to a different HLZ to experience differing environmental conditions.

The purpose of the approach and hover is for pilots to become familiar with landing helicopters in varied high elevation (i.e., low air density/temperature) conditions with uneven terrain, variable winds, trees, and surrounding mountains and canyons. At any given time, no more than two aircraft would land within an HLZ and no personnel would exit the helicopter within the HLZ, except during an emergency or to perform an aircraft mechanical inspection on a strictly as-needed basis.

Most HAMETS training flights would be split approximately evenly between day and night operations with some night-time operations in the summer extending to midnight (12:00 AM) to account for shorter periods of darkness. Most nighttime operations would occur in total darkness to allow training in the use of night vision goggles and other imaging equipment. For the purpose of HAMETS training, daytime is defined as 30 minutes prior to sunrise to 30 minutes after sunset and nighttime is 30 minutes after sunset to 30 minutes before sunrise.

No ground forces insertions (e.g., soldiers debarking from helicopters to train in the forest) would occur as part of this action and ground operations would not occur on any United States Forest Service HLZs. Flares, chaff, dud, or live ammunition would not be deployed within the Lincoln National Forest and all helicopter operations off-post would be un-armed. Helicopters would not power or shut down while performing HAMETS training at any off-post HLZs, unless an emergency situation exists where continued flight would be detrimental to the survival of the crew and/or aircraft. Additional information regarding these actions can be obtained from: Marcie Kelton, Natural Resources Manager, 4 Lost Lodge Rd, PO Box 288, Cloudcroft, NM 88317; 575-682-2551; marciekelton@fs.fed.us; or on the Lincoln National Forest projects website - <http://www.fs.usda.gov/projects/lincoln/landmanagement/projects>.

How to Submit Comments

This solicitation serves as a designated opportunity for public comment. Reviewers should clearly articulate their concerns and contentions related to the project proposal. Comments should be within the scope of the proposed action, have a direct relationship to the proposed action, and must include supporting reasons for the responsible official to consider (36 CFR 218.2).

Specific written comments including attachments may be submitted by email in word (.doc), rich text format (.rtf), text (.txt), or hypertext markup language (.html) to comments-southwestern-lincoln-sacramento@fs.fed.us and include the project title in the subject line. Specific written

comments may also be submitted via mail, fax, or in person (Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., excluding holidays) to: Travis Moseley, Forest Supervisor, c/o Ciara Cusack, PO Box 288, Cloudcroft, NM 88317; or faxed to 575-682-3394; or at an official agency function (i.e. public meeting) that is designed to elicit public comments.

Although comments may be submitted and will be considered by the responsible official at any time prior to the decision being signed, only specific written comments (as defined in 36 CFR 218.2) received within 30 days following the publication of the legal notice in the Alamogordo Daily News will provide the reviewer with the ability to object to the draft decision when it becomes available. The publication date of the legal notice is the exclusive means for calculating the designated comment period. Those wishing to comment should not rely upon dates or timeframe information provided by any other source. If the comment period ends on a Saturday, Sunday, or Federal holiday, the comment period will be extended until the end of the next Federal working day. It is the responsibility of the sender to ensure timely receipt of any comments submitted (as outlined in 36 CFR 218.25(a)(4)).

Only individuals or entities (as defined by 36 CFR 218.2) who submit timely and specific written comments about this proposed project or activity during this or another official public comment period established by the Responsible Official will be eligible to file an objection. Other requirements to be eligible to submit an objection are defined by 36 CFR 218.25(a)(3). Oral comments and written comments submitted outside a designated opportunity for public comment will be considered but will not establish objection eligibility.

Comments must have an identifiable name attached or verification of identity will be required. A scanned signature may serve as verification on electronic comments. Anyone submitting comments are asked to provide their name and postal mailing address so that they can be added to the project mailing list. Names and contact information submitted with comments will become part of the public record and may be released under the Freedom of Information Act. Comments submitted anonymously will be considered; however, anonymous comments will not provide the Agency with the ability to provide the respondent with subsequent environmental documents.

Thank you for your interest in the Lincoln National Forest.

Sincerely,



TRAVIS MOSELEY
Forest Supervisor

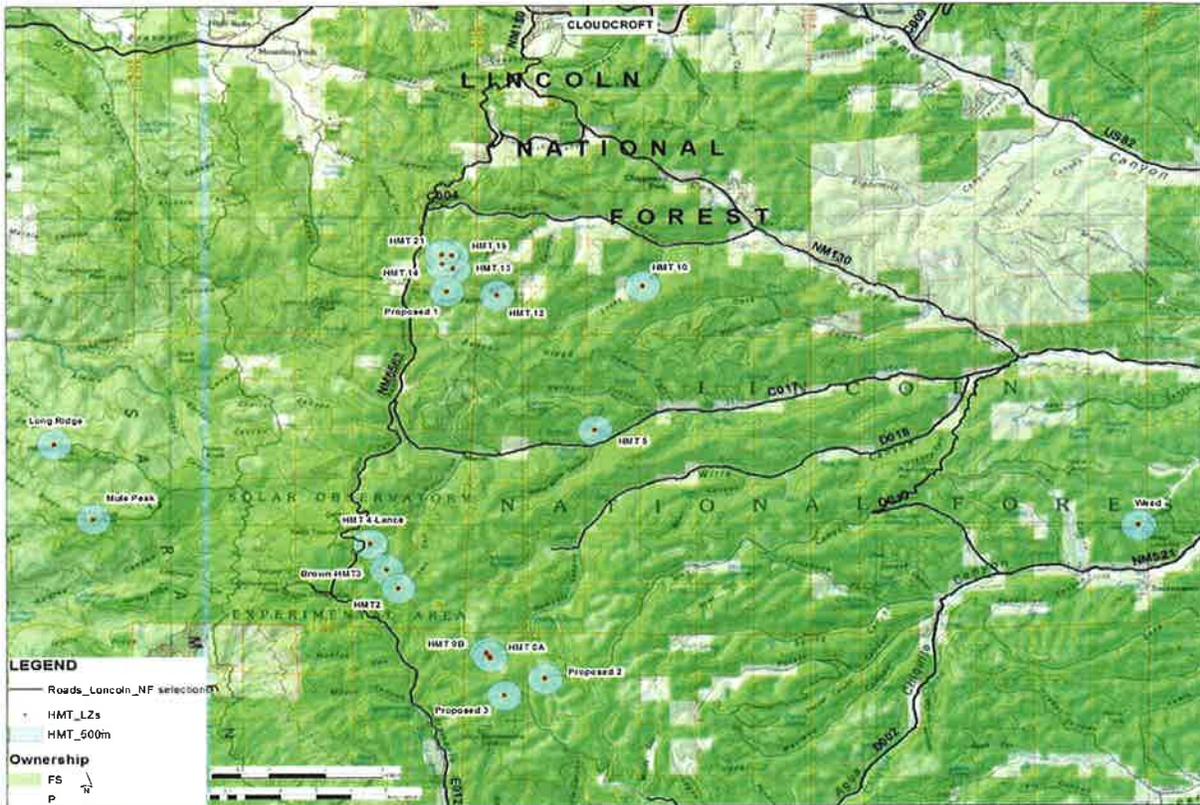


Figure 1 Proposed HAMETS helicopter landing zones within the Lincoln National Forest. Operating altitudes within the forest would be maintained at least 2,000 feet above ground level except when inside the landing zone circles (500 meters or 0.3 miles) where the operating altitude would be under 500 feet.

In accordance with Federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, the USDA, its Agencies, offices, and employees, and institutions participating in or administering USDA programs are prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA (not all bases apply to all programs). Remedies and complaint filing deadlines vary by program or incident.

Persons with disabilities who require alternative means of communication for program information (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotope, American Sign Language, etc.) should contact the responsible Agency or USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TTY) or contact USDA through the Federal Relay Service at (800) 877-8339. Additionally, program information may be made available in languages other than English.

To file a program discrimination complaint, complete the USDA Program Discrimination Complaint Form, AD-3027, found online at http://www.ascr.usda.gov/complaint_filing_cust.html and at any USDA office or write a letter addressed to USDA and provide in the letter all of the information requested in the form. To request a copy of the complaint form, call (866) 632-9992. Submit your completed form or letter to USDA by: (1) mail: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, D.C. 20250-9410; (2) fax: (202) 690-7442; or (3) email: program.intake@usda.gov (link sends e-mail).

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