

4.13 SAFETY

Safety issues considered include ground, flight, and explosive safety on McGregor Range. The elements of each alternative that have a potential to affect safety, are evaluated relative to the degree to which the activity increases or decreases safety risks to military personnel, the public, and property.

4.13.1 Alternative 1

As described in Section 2.1.1, military activities could vary from the same as currently conducted to an expanded range of capabilities and intensified use. Under Alternative 1, safety considerations associated with mission activities result from increased human presence, use of ordnance, live firing of missiles, and aircraft overflight. As discussed in Section 3.13, all training and firing exercises are conducted in accordance with detailed SOPs documented for each range used and each specific event conducted. Responsibilities for fire detection and suppression are clearly defined. SDZs associated with live firing events are evacuated prior to the event, and, if applicable, any remaining ordnance and explosive hazards are properly disposed after the event. All ordnance, including malfunctioned ordnance, is handled, stored, processed, and disposed in accordance with approved SOPs. In general, changes in the levels of use of specific ranges, or in the number of live firing events do not necessarily increase safety risks. Scheduling prevents incompatible range-use conflicts. In terms of risk management, each live fire event can be considered a discreet event. For each event, ground, fire, and explosive safety risks are managed by conducting the operation in accordance with established safety procedures. Therefore, if each event is so conducted, no single event poses any more risk than any other.

Possible upgrades and improvements on McGregor Range include upgrades to missile launch sites, and developing a law enforcement range complex and a multi-purpose small arms range. Upgrades at the missile launch and firing points would enhance safety for these operations. If developed, the law enforcement range would be located in the Meyer Range complex. These ranges currently support extensive small-arms training. Safety procedures governing these operations would remain in effect and be applicable for any new activities. There are no significantly increased risks associated with this expansion.

Additional controlled access FTX sites may also be established under this alternative. Selected sites will be free of any ordnance or explosive hazards.

Two initiatives resulting in increased aviation activity may also occur under this alternative. A comprehensive helicopter training complex may be developed on McGregor Range, and the USAF plan to develop a new air-to-ground tactical target complex on McGregor Range.

An attack helicopter gunnery range could be developed in the southern area of the range. All training areas developed would incorporate safety and buffer areas to accommodate whatever ordnance would be used. Adequate land area and restricted airspace are available to satisfy these requirements. While this increase in rotary-wing flight would increase flight hours on the range, and create some increase in the risk of Class A mishaps, these increases are not considered significant.

As part of the USAF's support of GAF training at HAFB, the USAF selected the Otero Mesa on McGregor Range for a new air-to-ground range. The increased use of the airspace associated with McGregor Range will have some safety impacts. The construction and use of the range will have the potential to increase fire risk. Construction, use of, and maintenance on the range conducted by the USAF, coupled with Army training and live fire activities in the area, indicate the potential for a safety impact resulting from ordnance and explosive hazards. However, close coordination between all users and clean-up will minimize this potential risk.

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Another potential initiative involves developing TBM targets for ADA training. However, if flight and safety data are applied to the target missile's proposed trajectory, and these are combined with the Patriot's range safety data, and the comprehensive SDZs remain within range boundaries, no significant safety issues should be associated with this operation. This potential proposal will require extensive safety analyses, and a separate environmental analysis, prior to implementation.

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An initiative by WSMR with safety implications involves the proposal to launch an ATACMS from Fort Wingate, New Mexico, to impact on McGregor Range. WSMR currently conducts such launches that terminate in impact areas on WSMR. The safety implications of these activities were assessed in the *Theater Missile Defense Extended Test Range EIS* completed in November 1994. When the launch occurs, coordination is affected with the FAA, landowners potentially impacted are notified, and some residents are evacuated.

Under this alternative, it is possible that the ASP on McGregor Range could be extended. This project, with its supporting infrastructure, will enhance explosive safety.

Initiatives to explore and develop geothermal resources create little risk in themselves. However, the potential presence of ordnance and explosive hazards in areas must be considered, and any necessary clean-up must be completed prior to project initiation.

Other possible facility-related projects create no unusual construction requirements, and pose little risk. Some proposals, such as developing new water supplies and additional water storage capability, will enhance fire safety in remote areas.

Some developmental, restoration, or survey activities may create new ground disturbances, or rehabilitate already disturbed ground. Restorative measures should, to the maximum extent practicable, attempt to re-establish native species of vegetation. This will minimize the potential for the invasion of exotic, weedy species of vegetation that may have the potential to create or exacerbate fire risk. During restoration activities, in some cases it is likely that fuel-powered equipment and vehicles will be used. Operators of this equipment should be attentive to the risks associated with sparks, hot exhaust systems, and mufflers coming into contact with vegetation during periods of high fire risk. In range areas that support concentrated low-altitude aviation activity, natural resource management actions dealing with vegetation management or restoration should consider potential bird-aircraft strike risks. To the maximum extent practicable in those specific areas, actions that would produce habitat particularly attractive to birds should be minimized from a safety viewpoint. Anything that would discourage birds from congregating in these specific areas would enhance flight safety, and minimize risk of bird mortality.

There are other elements of the environmental resource management programs that introduce the potential for increased joint-use of portions of the range areas. Increased access requires increased surveillance and control, to ensure clearing of areas that may be involved in military range use. Personnel conducting ground-truthing or surveys under these programs must be sensitive to the possible presence of ordnance and explosive hazards. However, if proper procedures are established, ground and explosive safety risks will remain low.

4.13.2 Alternative 2

For Alternative 2, some of the northern portions of McGregor Range would be proposed for return to public use. All required ordnance and explosive hazards removal must be accomplished prior to return of the lands to the public domain. Safety considerations pertaining to activities that may be conducted on these lands would be managed by BLM, and any processes or procedures associated with use of these lands would be documented in the area's management plan.

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Although the loss of some land area would necessitate some constraints on Patriot missile firings due to reduction in land available for SDZs, all other mission activities and safety issues associated with them remain as identified and discussed in Section 4.13.1.

Resource management activities, and the safety issues associated with them would remain as described in Section 4.13.1.

4.13.3 Alternative 3

Under Alternative 3, additional lands along the northern and eastern borders of the current range would cease to be withdrawn for military use, and would be proposed for return to public use. All required ordnance removal must be accomplished prior to return of the lands to the public domain. Safety considerations pertaining to activities that may be conducted on these lands would be managed by BLM, and any processes or procedures associated with use of these lands would be documented in the area's management plan.

In general, the majority of Fort Bliss' missions could still be supported under this alternative. However, as the geographic area of the withdrawn lands constituting McGregor Range decreases, some mission aspects are lost. For example, training for some JTXs and operations from some controlled access FTX sites would no longer be possible. Additionally, land areas available for SDZs associated with live firings are also reduced. Nevertheless, since the majority of the overall missions at Fort Bliss would still occur, the safety issues associated with them remain as discussed in Section 4.13.1. Otero Mesa would be returned to public use under this alternative; therefore, the USAF's proposed new air-to-ground range could no longer be located there. The safety issues associated with all other mission activities remain as discussed in Section 4.13.1.

Resource management activities, and the safety issues associated with them would remain as described in Section 4.13.1.

4.13.4 Alternative 4

Under this alternative, additional lands (in addition to those lands proposed under Alternatives 2 and 3) in the northern portion of McGregor Range would be returned for public use. All required ordnance and explosive hazards removal must be accomplished prior to return of the lands to the public domain. Safety considerations pertaining to activities that may be conducted on these lands would be managed by BLM, and any processes or procedures associated with use of these lands would be documented in the area's management plan.

In general, while live firing of ADA missiles would continue, the potential launch points would be limited and the land area available to support SDZs would severely constrain operations. Flight risks would be somewhat reduced inasmuch as the current Class C air-to-ground range in the northern portion of McGregor Range would no longer be available, and other aerial gunnery would be limited to a small portion of Tularosa Basin. Safety issues associated with all other mission activities remain as discussed in Section 4.13.1.

Resource management activities, and the safety issues associated with them would remain as described in Section 4.13.1.

4.13.5 Alternative 5 – No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, the withdrawal of the lands currently comprising McGregor Range would not be renewed, and all lands except the TAs 8 and 32 for which Army fee-owned land would be exchanged would revert to the public domain. All required clean-up must be accomplished prior to return of the lands to the public domain. Safety considerations pertaining to activities that may be conducted on these lands would be managed by BLM, and any processes or procedures associated with use of these lands would be documented in the area's management plan.

The lateral boundaries of the restricted airspace are not forecast to change under this alternative, and air-to-air training activities could continue to be conducted in this region. Under this alternative, aircraft flight risks would not be expected to change, and would probably be less since some current aviation flight risks result from aircraft supporting other McGregor Range activities. All air-to-ground, ground-to-ground, and ground-to-air activities on the range would cease, thus eliminating risk from these sources. Nonmilitary activities would be based on future land uses.

4.13.6 Alternative 6

Alternative 6 would result in changes in designation for some special land use categories presently on McGregor Range. These differing land use designations could result in some shifting and alteration of range activities that could influence safety risks. It is assumed that land management actions associated with the NCA would be similar to those under the current RMPA. However, because the precise nature and extent of the congressional action cannot be determined at this time, detailed safety analysis of this alternative is deferred until the proposal is specified for this type of nonmilitary withdrawal by the DOI.

4.13.7 Cumulative Impacts

Overall, no significant adverse cumulative safety impacts would be expected to occur. Nonmilitary uses of McGregor Range withdrawn lands would continue under Alternatives 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6. Levels of nonmilitary use would be expected to vary little from present, creating little or no safety risks beyond those associated with the current potential for mineral and energy development.

Under Alternatives 1, 2, 3, and 4, McGregor Range is an integral component of military activities conducted by Fort Bliss. As such, it comprises one element of a military complex consisting of Fort Bliss, Biggs AAF, and other training areas such as the South Training Areas, the Doña Ana Range–North Training Areas, and WSMR. Some interrelated activities in these areas have the potential to result in safety impacts.

No representative activities proposed to be accomplished in the Fort Bliss Main Cantonment Area or on Biggs AAF indicate any potential for creating significant cumulative safety impacts. Potential cumulative effects could arise from other military activities in the region.

Many activities conducted on WSMR are very similar to those conducted on the Fort Bliss Training Complex (i.e., ordnance testing and development, missile live firings, etc.). When conducted, these activities occur over land and within restricted airspace that is controlled by WSMR. As with ordnance use on the Fort Bliss Training Complex, ordnance use on WSMR is governed by detailed safety procedures that apply similar criteria for developing safety and clear zones applicable to the ordnance or weapon being fired. These safety zones ensure that no person is exposed to risk at the firing or impact point, along the ground/air flight track, or trajectory of the weapon. Flight paths used, ensure that the ordnance will always be contained within the installation's borders. As previously discussed, each ordnance firing event is discreet. Therefore, if each is conducted in accordance with all prescribed safety

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procedures, there is no cumulative safety risk. On those rare occasions when both WSMR and the Fort Bliss Training Complex are involved in the same test (e.g., live fire of the ATACMS), coordination between the two agencies ensures that there is no airspace or land-area conflict.

At HAFB, the recent termination of flight training for the Taiwanese Air Force has significantly reduced the number of T-38 aircraft sorties using McGregor Range airspace and the Class C bomb circle located in its northern portion. This action reduces flight risk in the area, and reduces the number of training bombs dropped on the Class C range. Overall, fire and flight safety are improved, since fewer aircraft will be using the airspace, and fewer training bombs will be dropped resulting in less exposure of vegetation to the high heat generated by the spotting charges in the bombs. Additionally, since fewer training bombs will be dropped, there will be less potential for spotting charge malfunction, thus improving explosive safety. However, a second activity associated with HAFB involves a USAF tactical target complex to be constructed on McGregor Range on Otero Mesa, which will partially offset the cumulative effects of the decline in T-38 flights. Although safety statistics indicate that the Tornado is a very safe aircraft, and only training bombs will be dropped, the increased use of the regional restricted airspace will have some safety impacts. Flight safety risks will increase slightly (USAF, 1998). The construction and use of the range will have the potential to increase fire risk. Use of the range may also slightly increase the risk of the presence of ordnance and explosive hazards in the range's impact area. However, regular ordnance removal and clean-up by qualified personnel will reduce these risks.

4.13.8 Mitigation

Since no significantly adverse safety impacts are expected to occur, no mitigations are recommended.

4.13.9 Irreversible and Irretrievable Commitment of Resources

No irreversible or irretrievable commitment of resources would occur.

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