

ACCESS FUND ♦ ADVENTURE WENATCHEE ♦ ALPINE ADVENTURES ♦ ALPINE LAKES PROTECTION SOCIETY ♦  
AMERICAN WHITEWATER ♦ CHELAN\_DOUGLAS LAND TRUST ♦ CLARK-SKAMANIA FLYFISHERS ♦  
CONSERVATION NORTHWEST ♦ CROWN S RANCH ♦ DAS RAD HAUS ♦ DER SPORTSMANN ♦  
EL SENDERO BACKCOUNTRY SKI AND SNOWSHOE CLUB ♦ EVERGREEN MOUNTAIN BIKE ALLIANCE ♦  
FRIENDS OF GRAYS HARBOR ♦ GIFFORD PINCHOT TASK FORCE ♦ GRAYS HARBOR AUDUBON SOCIETY ♦  
ICICLE BREWING COMPANY ♦ ICICLE OUTFITTERS ♦ LAKE CHELAN NORDIC SKI CLUB ♦ LEAVENWORTH MOUNTAIN SPORTS ♦  
LEAVENWORTH OUTFITTERS ♦ LEAVENWORTH PROPERTIES ♦ LOST RIVER WINERY ♦ MAZAMA COUNTRY INN ♦  
METHOW CYLCE AND SPORT ♦ METHOW TRAILS ♦ METHOW VALLEY CITIZENS' COUNCIL ♦ MOUNT BAKER CLUB ♦  
MUNCHEN HAUS ♦ MURRELET SURVIVAL PROJECT ♦ NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION ♦  
NORTH CASCADES AUDUBON SOCIETY ♦ NORTH CASCADES BASE CAMP ♦ NORTH CASCADES CONSERVATION COUNCIL ♦  
NORTH CASCADES MOUNTAIN GUIDES ♦ NORTH CENTRAL WASHINGTON AUDUBON SOCIETY ♦  
NORTHWEST MOUNTAIN SCHOOL ♦ NORTHWEST OUTWARD BOUND ♦ NORTHWEST WATERSHED INSTITUTE ♦  
OKANAGON HIGHLANDS ALLIANCE ♦ OLYMPIC FOREST COALITION ♦ OLYMPIC PARK ASSOCIATES ♦ ORION EXPEDITIONS ♦  
OSPREY RAFTING & SKI SHOP ♦ RIVER RIDERS ♦ ROCKING HORSE BAKERY ♦ RUN WENATCHEE ♦ SEATTLE AUDUBON SOCIETY ♦  
SEATTLE CHAPTER OF THE ISAAK WALTON LEAGUE ♦ SIERRA CLUB – WASHINGTON CHAPTER ♦ SKAGIT AUDUBON SOCIETY ♦  
SUN MOUNTAIN LODGE ♦ THE MOUNTAINEERS ♦ THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY ♦ TWISP RIVER PUB ♦ WASHINGTON BIKES ♦  
WASHINGTON CLIMBERS COALITION ♦ WASHINGTON TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION ♦  
WASHINGTON TRAILS ASSOCIATION ♦ WASHINGTON WILD ♦ WASHINGTON WILDLIFE FEDERATION ♦  
WEST COAST ACTION ALLIANCE ♦ WILD FISH CONSERVANCY ♦ WILD STEELHEAD COALITION ♦ WILD WATER RIVER GUIDES ♦  
WINDEMERE – METHOW VALLEY ♦ WINTHROP MOUNTAIN SPORTS ♦

November 3, 2015

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Dear Directorate of Public Works:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments to the Army's Northwest Aviation Operations Off-base Helicopter Training Areas proposal. The undersigned organizations represent conservation, recreation and civic groups that are heavily invested in the recreation, wildlife and habitat, and local communities in and near the proposed Helicopter Training Areas (HTA) and Mountain Training Areas (MTA), and between the base and training areas.

As Americans we all understand and appreciate the need for our military to provide the quality training necessary to defend our country when the time for deployment arrives. Moreover, we support the need of the Army to provide this training to ensure that our troops are ready and prepared to serve their country.

We also feel strongly that we can and should be able to ensure that we can achieve military readiness through appropriate training exercises while at the same time honoring the decades of significant investment that the American public, the U.S. Congress, federal agencies and local residents have made over the past several decades in conservation, recreation, wildlife and habitat, local economies and the quality of life of rural communities in or around the proposed HTAs and MTA.

We submit the following comments to the scoping document and hope that they will be considered and influence the nature of the Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that will need to be prepared in the coming months. In our opinion, a number of these issues have not yet been adequately analyzed in the scoping document and additional work must be done and incorporated before a draft EA or EIS is released.

## PROCESS RELATED CONCERNS

### I. The Proposed EA/EIS Schedule is Overly Aggressive and Expedited

The EA/EIS preparation schedule proposed on Pg. 18 of the scoping document proposes the minimum comment period of 30 days for an Environmental Assessment without any scoping public meetings. While scoping public meetings are not a requirement under the National Environmental Policy Act, they are commonly incorporated by the U.S. Forest Service and other federal land management agencies when dealing with a significant and potentially controversial proposal such as this one.

After the scoping comment deadline closes on July 30, the schedule calls for an unrealistic release date of an EA/EIS for September 1. This seems unprecedented to those of us who have worked on U.S. Forest Service and other federal public lands EA/EIS processes. We are concerned that 32 days is an insufficient time to organize, read digest and incorporate the likely significant number of scoping comments that will be received by the Army on this proposal – let alone the time to draft an Environmental Assessment based on the input received during the scoping period.

The comment period proposed for the draft EA/EIS includes three public meetings but is set for the minimal length required by NEPA – 30 days. Considering the attention that this issue has already received from local media outlets including the Seattle Times, Wenatchee World, Methow Valley News, Bellingham Herald and the Olympian we feel it would be prudent and helpful to provide a 60 day comment period for the draft EA/EIS.

With respect to the release of the final EA/EIS, the schedule calls for releasing a document just 31 days after the draft EA comment period is closed. Again, such a time frame is unrealistic for an issue of this nature, and we are concerned that important and substantive comments received during the comment period will not be able to be adequately included in a final EA/EIS.

### II. Only One Alternative Aside From The No Action Alternative Is Identified In The Scoping Document

The scoping document only identifies a No Action Alternative and a Proposed Alternative which is the minimum required by NEPA. We hope that the Army will be open to expanding the number of alternatives as part of the draft EA/EIS based on feedback received during scoping. An important requirement of NEPA is to provide and analyze the range of reasonable alternatives. We expect that based on scoping comments there may be interest in providing and analyzing additional alternatives.

## CONSERVATION RELATED CONCERNS

### III. Inclusion of Helicopter Landing Area and Portions of the MTA in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness

The inclusion of a helicopter landing site (MTA 1-4) within the borders of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness is of significant concern. Section 4(c) of the Wilderness Act of 1964 clearly states a prohibition on motorized use:

*“(c) Except as specifically provided for in this Act, and subject to existing private rights, there shall be ... no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, no landing of aircraft, no other form of mechanical transport, and no structure or installation within any such area.”*

It is concerning that The Wilderness Act of 1964 is not listed as one of the nine “laws and related regulations bearing on the proposed Army actions...” listed on Pg. 7 of the scoping document.

We assume that the decision to exclude the Pasayten, Steven Mather, Glacier Peak and Henry M. Jackson Wilderness Areas in the MTA boundary was based on the Army’s understanding of prohibitions of motorized use (including helicopters) in designated Wilderness areas. We appreciate the Army’s recognition of the fact that areas designated

under the 50-year old Wilderness Act are important and valued conservation areas. However, it is puzzling why portions of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness were included in the MTA.

We feel strongly that helicopter landing site MT 1-4 and the portions of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness included in the MTA should be removed from any proposal moving forward as not conforming with federal law.

In addition to the obvious inclusion of the eastern portion of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area in the Mountain Training Area, there appears to be several instances where portions of the Henry M. Jackson, Glacier Peak and Lake Chelan-Sawtooth Wilderness areas were included within the MTA. While we were not able to obtain GIS layers for the boundaries of the MTA, we digitized the boundary and overlaid it with designated Wilderness areas in the North Cascades (See map attached to this comment letter). Inclusion of these parcels may have been unintentional. Whether intentional or not, we request that the Army exclude all designated Wilderness areas from the MTA.

#### IV. Potential Impacts to National Park and Wilderness Areas En route but outside of Training Areas

We appreciate that the Army recognized on Pg. 14-16 of the scoping document that Best Management Practices (BMP) apply to areas of special concern like National Parks, Wilderness Areas and National Wildlife Refuges. The relevant BMPs include:

- *Where feasible, pilots would follow guidance in FAA Advisory Circular 91-36D, which recommends that pilots maintain a minimum altitude of 2,000 feet (610 meters) AGL when flying over noise sensitive areas, such as National Parks, National Wildlife Refuges, Wilderness Areas, and other areas where a quiet setting is a generally recognized feature or attribute of the land.*
- *Per the Fly Friendly Program, when conditions allow, aircraft would fly no lower than 500 feet above ground level and avoid noise-sensitive areas such as Indian Reservations, parks and wilderness areas, residential areas, schools, hospitals and built up areas.*

Our understanding is that outside the training areas or en route to their destination, aircraft would not fly below 2,000 feet elevation above National Park, Wilderness Areas and National Wildlife Refuges. We would like the Army to consider raising the floor altitude over Wilderness, parks, endangered species habitat, late-successional reserves, roadless areas, and national wildlife refuges as we are concerned that noise and other related impacts are still relevant at that elevation in these special areas.

#### V. Potential Inconsistency with Conservation-Related Management Plans

Both Southwestern Washington and the North Cascades are currently developing conservation management plans - including the US Forest Service's revision for the Okanogan Wenatchee National Forest Plan (OWNFP), and the State Department of Natural Resources' Marbled Murrelet Long Term Conservation Strategy (MMLTCS).

Prior to developing a draft EA/EIS, the Army should consult with the Okanogan Wenatchee National Forest to identify if there are any proposed management actions that conflict with the Army's proposal in the current forest plan. That existing document lays out management for recreational activities, wildlife and habitat protection, protection of viewsheds and soundscapes as well as many other factors that may potentially conflict with the helicopter training activities as proposed.

DNR is currently developing its Marbled Murrelet Long Term Conservation Strategy required under the Endangered Species Act to safeguard some of these remaining habitats in Washington State. Some of the most important marbled murrelet management areas as outlined in DNR's 2008 Science Report reside in southwest WA. These include the Nemah, Salmon Creek, Skamokawa, Browning, Grays, Pe Ell, and Lebam Marbled Murrelet Management Areas. Some of these were rated as the most significant recovery areas in the state. Additional noise disturbance from low elevation training could severely degrade the quality of that habitat and negatively impact DNR's investment in recovery efforts.

## RECREATION RELATED CONCERNS

The Mountain Training Area is mostly comprised of the Okanogan Wenatchee National Forest (OWNF). The OWNF is well known and prized by locals and visitors alike for its diverse and myriad recreational opportunities. The forest boasts more than 2,000 miles of recreation trails, more than 20 developed campgrounds and recreational rental cabins. More than 8,000 miles of roads traverse the forest, many of which provide access to recreational opportunities.

The OWNF offers a range of world class and family oriented recreational opportunities to hunt, fish, camp, hike, mountain bike, paddle, horsepack, climb, ski, watch wildlife, take nature photographs and a host of other activities. According to the U.S. Forest Service, the Forest receives 2,130,800 visits roughly split in half between day and overnight visits.<sup>1</sup>

### VI. Potential Impacts to Recreational Opportunities from Proposed Helicopter Landing Sites in the MTA

A significant amount of hours and resources have been invested by volunteers, organizations and local residents to build, maintain and market this considerable recreational infrastructure. We are concerned that the analysis around potential impacts to recreational opportunities done prior to scoping was not sufficient to protect this substantial investment.

Specifically, the proposed helicopter landing sites in the proposed Mountain Training Area has raised a number of concerns:

- **MTA 1-1 (Stormy Mountain, Section 29)** – The proposed landing site is located directly on top of a portion the Devil’s Backbone Trail (#1448) and less than a mile from Windy Camp Campground, FS Road 8410 and a scenic roadside viewpoint SE of Stormy Mountain in section 33. This area is used by hikers, mountain bikers and campers. In addition, during the winter months the NW Ridge of Stormy Mountain is a popular backcountry ski run that originates on the summit of Stormy Mountain and runs down the south face. Helicopter landings or low level flights on or near the summit of Stormy Mountain in the winter could potentially trigger an avalanche on unsuspecting skiers recreating on the slopes below.
- **MTA 1-2 (Devil’s Backbone, Section 24)** – The proposed landing site is located between Stormy Mountain and Angle Peak directly on top of the Devil’s Backbone Trail (#1448) and less than two miles from the junction with the Pot Peak Trail (#1266). Angle Peak is a beautiful, scenic high country ridgetop with views North to Chelan Lake and South into the Entiat Valley. Pot Peak is a popular day hike destination for hikers camping at Ramona Park Campground and Twenty-Five Mile State Park Campground on Lake Chelan.
- **MTA 1-3 (Two-Little Lakes, Section 7)** – This landing site is located directly on top of the Blue Creek Trail (#1426), less than a mile from Mad River Trail (#1409) and less than two miles from Blue Creek Meadow Campground, the Lost Lake Trail (#1421), the East Blue Creek Meadow Trail (#1424). Within 2.5 Miles of MTA 1-3, is the North Tommy Trail (#1425) and two hunter’s shelters at Two-Little Lakes meadow and one at Whistling Pig Meadow.
- **MTA 1-4 (Ida Lake, Alpine Lakes Wilderness, Section 27)** – The proposed landing site is located on the Alpine Lakes Wilderness boundary, on Icicle Ridge atop Big Lou Mountain, which is a popular rock scramble, less than one mile from Ida Lake, approximately 1.5 miles from Carter Lake and Lake Augusta in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness and surrounded by trails and campgrounds too numerous to list here.

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<sup>1</sup> Proposed Action for Forest Plan Revision Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, USDA, 2011

- **MTA 1-5 (Rock Mountain, Section 23)** – This landing site is located on Rock Mountain less than two miles from the Tiffany Lake Trail (#373), the Freezout Ridge Trail (#345), the Tiffany Springs Campground and the popular Parachute Meadow winter recreation area. Rock Mountain itself is a popular rock scramble and the area is unique on the OWNF for its accessible high elevation meadows.
- **MTA 1-6 (Azurite Peak, Pacific Crest Trail, Section 4)** – This landing site is less than 2 miles from the iconic Pacific Crest Trail (#2000), the East Creek Trail (#756) and the West Fork Methow Trail (#480). The site is also located only 4.5 miles from Harts Pass road, the highest driveable road in the state and a popular recreation area with two nearby campgrounds, a Forest Service guard station and numerous trails.
- **MTA 1-7 (Sawtooth Ridge, Section 16)** – This landing site is located directly on top of the Martin Creek Trail (#429), less than a mile from the Cooney Lake Trail (#434) and Martin Lakes Trail (#429B), and less than two miles from the Merchants Basin Trail (#417). This is a highly popular hiking destination known as the “Golden Lakes Loop.”

#### VII. Potential Impacts to Recreational Opportunities from the Mountain Training Area

In addition to the landing sites, we are also concerned about impacts to recreational activities from the proposed training activities throughout the MTA. Travel to and from the landing sites may have impacts on recreation activities depending on the frequency and flight plans of the exercises. The scoping document gives no clarity of limitation about either of these factors. Furthermore, the scoping document leaves open the possibility that the MTA could be used in the future by other military units which would further exacerbate these concerns. We feel the Army should consider limitations on frequency of activities, greater certainty with respect to flight paths and limit the use of the proposed training sites to JBLM activities.

#### **WILDLIFE RELATED CONCERNS**

The North Cascades and Southwest Washington are critically important ecosystems for plants and animals in Washington State. Anchored by federal Wilderness, national park and national forest lands as well as Department of Natural Resource lands – these landscapes have significant ecological importance for long-term viability of Pacific Northwest species. The lands serve as population and habitat strongholds for a number of endangered and threatened species, including the salmon, steelhead and bull trout, northern spotted owl, marbled murrelet, Canada lynx, wolf, and grizzly bear. Some imperiled species, like wolverine, are returning to the pristine North Cascades on their own, while fisher is on track to be reintroduced and recovered by state, federal, and provincial agencies.

#### VIII. Potential Impacts to High Elevation Wildlife and Habitat

The proposed training and low elevation flights, including between the base and training areas, may significantly impact high elevation plants and animal communities, birds with seasonal or daily migrations, and threatened, endangered, sensitive, and other wildlife and their habitat. Depending on flight and training intensity, these impacts may be significant and controversial, warranting deeper and broader review under an EIS. For example, high elevation sub-alpine and alpine areas in the North Cascades are highly sensitive to disturbance, with thin soils and short growing seasons. Intense disturbance from landing and training actions may cause significant and irreversible damage. Noise disruption from aircraft travel, especially from low elevation flight, can disrupt behavior and render habitat unsuitable during critical breeding periods and at other times, increasing mortality risk and threatening viability. Vehicle collisions with airborne birds are often fatal.

The Mountain Training Areas are located in areas inhabited by Canada lynx and wolverine, and within the North Cascades Grizzly Bear Recovery Area where recovery efforts are underway. These animals use high elevation areas for denning, reproduction, and foraging. Mountain goats, which have declined statewide, also occur and overwinter in these high-elevation environments. Spotted owls, whose range is collapsing from the north, inhabit forests

adjacent to training areas within travel zones. Disturbance near dens or other habitat areas has been shown to displace or disrupt grizzly bears, wolverines, mountain goats and spotted owls, and should be avoided.

IX. Potential Impacts for Low Elevation Flights

Proposed training actions, including low elevation flights from operations base, may impact, degrade or render inhospitable habitat protected within Late-Successional and Riparian Reserves on the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie, Gifford Pinchot, and Okanogan-Wenatchee national forests, habitat protected within Spotted Owl Emphasis Areas and around spotted owl nest sites on state forests, critical habitat or recovery areas designated under the Endangered Species Act, lands identified as Priority Habitat by the state, Inventoried Roadless Areas, and suitable mountain goat habitat. These areas are essential to the protection and recovery of Washington's wildlife, and should be avoided by aircraft and excluded from training activities.

The Helicopter Training Areas occur on or proximate to DNR-managed state lands that are critical to marbled murrelet recovery. Due to the lack of federal lands in southwest Washington, state lands provide essential habitat connections between marbled murrelet populations in Olympic National Forest and populations in Oregon and Northern California. Marbled murrelets are extremely sensitive to human disturbance, including noise. The proposed training would likely disturb marbled murrelets during nesting season. Murrelet populations also face risk of aircraft collision during daily migrations from forest nesting grounds and foraging areas in the Pacific. Marbled murrelet habitat and areas between murrelet nesting and foraging areas should be avoided.

X. Cumulative Impacts on Wildlife and Habitat

The direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts from training and low-elevation flights from the operations base to Washington's wildlife and their habitats must be disclosed during environmental review, including the potential for proposed activities to disrupt, displace, or kill wildlife or render their habitat inhospitable or unusable.

**CONCERNS ABOUT IMPACTS TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

XI. Potential Impact to Local Economies that Rely on Recreation and Visitation to the Area

Many local rural communities such as Winthrop, Mazama, Plain, Lake Wenatchee and many others rely on the visitation to the Wenatchee-Okanogan National Forest to support an important part of their local economies. These visitors include hikers, paddlers, climbers, skiers, horseman and other recreationists as well as those seeking to get away from the urban cities in search of a the relative peace and quiet of the woods.

The draft EA should consider not only the direct impact to recreational opportunities from the proposed MTA but also the indirect impact the proposed activities may have on the local economic inputs to local communities.

XII. Potential Impact to local residents from noise related to helicopter activity

As helicopter training exercises increased on the JBLM site due to the recent consolidation from other bases, impacts to local residents from off base training exercises became an issue resulting in scores of complaints and periods of stopping training flights.<sup>2</sup> While the residents closest to the proposed MTA and HTAs may be less in number and more rural, the same concerns related to noise both day and night and uncertainty of when training exercises may occur are equally relevant. While we appreciate that the scoping document reference that the "fly friendly" program will apply to the training activities. However, the same program was in effect in 2013 when issues arose at JBLM. The draft EA/EIS should address specific actions that would help mitigate any potential impact on these local residents

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<sup>2</sup> Tacoma News Tribune, August 2013, "Flying low, loud, late and illegal near JBLM"  
<http://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/military/article25861411.html>

from low-flying helicopters such as disruption of their quality of life or sleep during night activities. Prior notice to local communities and predictability of when and where training missions would occur would be useful to consider in the draft EA/EIS.

### XIII. Impact on Lives and Property from Potential of Wildfire Ignition from Helicopter Accidents

The area within the Mountain Training Area is a dry forest ecosystem that, due to fire suppression, increasing fuel loads and several years of drought (including 2015), is highly susceptible to catastrophic wildfires that pose a threat to local residents lives, homes and personal property.

In the last 5 years, crashes have occurred both at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington and also in Colorado, where the Army currently trains aviators. Helicopters can be challenging to operate in the best conditions but the proposed activities include flying at high altitudes, at night and in difficult terrain. It would seem reasonable that the probability for accidents in this environment is elevated. If a crash ignited a fire in the summer of a drought year (like we are currently experiencing) a wildfire could become a serious threat to life, property and wildlife.

The Draft EA/EIS should analyze the probability of helicopter accidents (associated with the proposed training activities) igniting wildfires in the MTA and any mitigation that might apply.

### XIV. Coordination with Existing Air Traffic in the Area

The EA/EIS should also identify how any training exercises would not conflict with flight activities in the area already being used by state and federal agencies or private pilots to fight fires, rescue the public, and provide transport to communities around Lake Chelan like Stehekin.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposal during scoping. We hope that our input and the other feedback you will get early on in this process will help to inform a draft EA/EIS that will better address a number of the related concerns and issues discussed in this letter.

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# Proposed Joint Base Lewis-McChord Off-Base Helicopter Training Areas & Landing Zones

