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What the Growler Environment Impact Statement means off-Whidbey

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The Navy released the final amended analysis last month for the Environmental Impact Statement on EA-18G Growler aircraft operations at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island. According to those impacted in the surrounding area, the results are unsurprising.

While Whidbey Island takes the brunt of the impact from the loud aircraft, with risk of hearing impairment at 70 decibels or above, residents of Skagit and San Juan counties report sleeping disturbance and other health problems starting at 40 decibels, especially Fidalgo Island and the south end of Lopez.

Members of Quiet Skies Over San Juan County, an advocacy group that collects noise reports, have described the sound like “living in a warzone.”

The 85-page report acknowledges that noise from Growlers will have impacts on childhood education at schools on Whidbey Island, while stating the effects on test scores will be partially mitigated by the base’s efforts to reduce operations during academic testing periods.

The document, while only addressing Whidbey, concluded that Growlers do not significantly harm birds. References to San Juan County throughout the document are largely used to illustrate birds “outside of the impact area.”

According to the report, Growler noise is not likely to result in significant adverse effects on the six focal bird species analyzed on Whidbey. It states that stressors would be “intermittent and brief” and “would not disturb breeding, feeding and nesting behavior of individuals to a degree that would cause significant effects on their populations.”

Quiet Skies member and Lopez Islander Brian Silverstein’s comments were terse: “not surprised. They don’t care.”

In 2023, U.S. District Court Judge Richard Jones ordered the Navy to redo sections of the original Environment Impact Statement, which was prepared prior to the increase of Growler jets at the Whidbey air station.

A federal judge statement from December 2021 reads, “the Navy repeatedly stated that increased noise would have species-specific impacts on the many bird species in the affected area but then failed to conduct a species-specific analysis to determine if some species would be more affected than others. Instead, the Navy simply concluded that certain species were not adversely affected and then extrapolated that all the other species would not be affected, either.”

The final report also concluded that greenhouse gas emissions have increased with the inclusion of emissions above 3,000 feet. More flight hours would “nominally increase local and regional” greenhouse gas emissions but would not result in any meaningful adverse impact on a global scale.

In September, the Navy awarded more than \$38 million to Oak Harbor Public Schools to implement noise mitigation features at three elementary schools. Quiet Skies, Silverstein said, will continue to focus on reducing impacts to people by gathering data.

The government shutdown in October and November delayed the release of the final evaluation.

The document concluded that relocating Growler operations to Naval Air Facility El Centro in California would be expensive and less effective as well as increase the number of people affected by Growlers.

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