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Timeline for Release of Final EIS for Growler Operations at NAS Whidbey Island Extended

The release of the Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) analyzing an increase of EA-18G Growler aircraft at the NAS Whidbey Island complex, originally scheduled for autumn of this year, is being extended for about 10 months.

The purpose of the extension is to incorporate additional analysis of changes to Navy training that may reduce impacts to local communities. These changes are based upon the accelerated introduction of new technology that will reduce the Navy's requirement for Field Carrier Landing Practice (FCLP). Additionally, the Navy is considering additional FCLP distribution options that may further mitigate noise impacts at Ault Field and OLF Coupeville.

The Navy will also analyze changes based upon a reduced number of pilots to be assigned to Fleet Squadrons at NAS Whidbey Island (two fewer pilots per squadron). This will result in a decrease in projected operations.

Landing on an aircraft carrier is one of the most dangerous tasks in military aviation, which is why FCLP is so important. For several years, the Navy has been developing technology to make landing on a carrier easier and safer. This effort has resulted in the Navy's projected fleet-wide implementation of Precision Landing Mode (PLM) technology (also known as MAGIC CARPET, an acronym for Maritime Augmented Guidance with Integrated Controls for Carrier Approach and Recovery Precision Enabling Technologies).

PLM makes aircraft carrier approaches and landings more automated, resulting in a safer environment for Navy pilots. This technology will reduce the workload and training required for pilots to develop and maintain proficiency at shipboard landings. PLM has proven so successful that the Navy has decided to accelerate its fleet-wide implementation.

While it was premature to consider actual reductions in the FCLP requirements for the NAS Whidbey Island complex in the Draft EIS, the Navy now has more complete information based upon testing and operational use of this technology in the fleet.

The Navy believes that full integration of PLM will result in a significant reduction in FCLP operations at both Ault Field and OLF Coupeville, as well as all locations at which the Navy conducts FCLP. At this time, the Navy estimates that PLM may reduce FCLP training requirements by 20 percent. Analysis of this reduction will be incorporated into the Growler Final EIS.

New analysis based upon the incorporation of PLM and the reduced number of pilots assigned to each squadron is expected to reduce FCLP operations at NAS Whidbey Island and Ault Field. For example, under Alternative 2, the number of FCLP operations would be reduced from the annual average of 42,000 analyzed in the Draft EIS to an annual average of about 29,000 FCLP operations.

Additionally, the Final EIS will analyze two new scenarios to determine how the distribution of FCLP operations might affect noise impacts at Ault Field and OLF Coupeville. The Navy will include 30/70 and 70/30 scenarios, meaning that 30 percent of the FCLP would be conducted at Ault Field, and

70 percent at OLF Coupeville and vice versa, in addition to the 20/80, 50/50 and 80/20 scenarios analyzed in the Draft EIS.

Until the release of the Final EIS and a record of decision, the Navy will continue Growler operations at the NAS Whidbey Island complex at the current level, and described in the 2005 Environmental Assessment.

The Navy appreciates the concerns and input provided by members of the community surrounding NAS Whidbey Island and OLF Coupeville, and will address comments that were received during the public comment period that followed the release of the Draft EIS in the final version of the document.