

News: Olympic National Park Airspace, Growler Locations, Inadequate Noise Analysis

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From: **Rob Smith, Northwest Regional Director, National Parks Conservation Association**

Years of efforts are beginning to show some results on the effort to protect the natural sounds and quiet of Olympic National Park. There is also potential to do more, and some hope that it can happen.

Navy moves some flight paths to avoid Olympic NP

Last fall the U.S. Navy quietly issued their final Record of Decision – much delayed, perhaps by trying to address public comments – for their Northwest Training and Testing Range environmental impact study. While most of it concerned sea-going activities for the next five years, a significant component looked at EA-18G “Growler” jet training noise in the airspace over the west side of the Olympic Peninsula, including the park’s Hoh Rain Forest. Buried in the document was a statement that Olympic National Park is a “noise sensitive area” and that the Navy had worked with the FAA to move their transit flights between NAS Whidbey Island and the training airspace to avoid the park. While this was a modest readjustment, it does seem to be happening according to anecdotal reports. What is significant is that the Navy finally recognized in writing that Olympic NP exists and matters, and that they do in fact have some operational changes they can make to address jet noise concerns. This does not change the ongoing roar of their training flights over the West End, but it indicates that they’re feeling the pressure to do something enough to respond. See page 24 of the attached ROD. For a map of the new transit routes, see attached image. We still suggest flying higher and further away for training flights to reduce more jet noise over the park and nearby communities.

Navy proposes dropping five squadrons of Growlers – for real?

According to a news article from a defense publication – thanks to an alert reader and advocate for sharing this! – the Navy’s FY 2023 budget proposes to phase out 25 Growlers from their fleet over the next couple of years. These would be the land-based jets; the Navy would still retain the majority of the Growlers which are deployed on aircraft carriers. We’ve also heard from one expert observer that this is perhaps more of a ploy by the Navy to shed cost to other service branches than a real reduction in an asset the Pentagon highly values. However, once again, the Navy is indicating that current operations may not be permanently fixed. This does not necessarily mean that Growler training would be reduced at NAS Whidbey Island if other branches picked them up. But it could mean not every Growler needs to be based there. [US Navy Proposes to Divest Expeditionary EA-18G Squadrons.pdf](#)

Judge rules Navy jet noise analysis inadequate at Whidbey

Last December the Navy’s analysis of Growler jet noise near their base on Whidbey Island was found seriously lacking, and that’s a victory for WA AG Bob Ferguson and Citizens of Ebey’s Reserve which brought lawsuits. The Navy did not fully look at health impacts on residents, including children, or at alternative bases for these operations. The magistrate judge’s ruling needs to be reviewed by a regular judge before the decision is final, and that timing is unclear. We’re watching closely to see how this is decided because the concerns over impacts on the ground and a closer look at other locations for this training are ones we and others have raised for the Olympics.

Federal judge says Navy jets impacting Whidbey Island | AP News

NPS considers limiting air tours over Olympic, but not enough

Unrelated to the Navy jet issue, but relevant to protecting natural sound and quiet at Olympic NP, the National Park Service is developing draft air tour management plans over 23 parks around the country. Olympic is one, with more than 70 commercial air tours now allowed, which the agency would propose to reduce to about 65 based on actual flights flown during a three year pre-COVID period. During the public comment period last year, more than 4,000 comments were received just for Olympic (“about 98% of them opposed air tours”, according to a knowledgeable source). NPCA and a host of other outdoor and conservation organizations were critical of the NPS for not considering any other alternatives, especially a “no air tour” option, and for not setting a good example of sound stewardship for other airspace users like the Navy. The NPS is still considering what to do.

New Superintendent at Olympic National Park – let her hear about noise

A new superintendent will arrive at Olympic National Park in July, Sula Jacobs. Sula replaces long-time Olympic super Sarah Creachbaum who moved up to become NPS’s Alaska Regional Director some months ago. Here’s an opportunity to welcome Supt. Jacobs, and to express support for the park to do everything it can to protect the natural sounds and quiet of this World Heritage Site, whether it’s Navy jets or air tours. Contact her at olym_superintendent@nps.gov.

Sula Jacobs selected as superintendent for Olympic National Park - Olympic National Park (U.S. National Park Service) (nps.gov)

Continued public pressure to protect natural sounds is having some impact. Thank you for being part of that work. Let’s keep it up.

Soundly

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