
PROPOSED FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)
VANCE AIR FORCE BASE LOW MILITARY OPERATIONS AREA SPECIAL USE AIRSPACE

The Department of the Air Force (DAF) has prepared the attached Environmental Assessment (EA) to evaluate the potential environmental consequences from the Proposed Action and Alternatives (Proposed Action) to obtain a new permanent low-altitude airspace for the 71st Flying Training Wing (71 FTW) at Vance Air Force Base (AFB), Oklahoma to support Fighter Bomber Fundamentals (FBF) pilot training syllabus requirements. The proposed airspace would also be available for use by the Oklahoma Air National Guard (ANG) as scheduling and operational requirements allow. The proposed airspace would be managed and scheduled by the 71 FTW.

The attached EA was prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), as amended by Public Law 30 118-5, Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023 (42 United States Code 4321 et seq.). The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is participating as a cooperating agency during the preparation of this EA in accordance with the Memorandum of Understanding between the DoD and the FAA for environmental review of Special Use Airspace (SUA) actions under FAA Order JO 7400.2, *Procedures for Handling Airspace Matters* (the current versions of FAA Orders are referenced in the EA as applicable). The attached EA is incorporated by reference in this proposed Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI).

Purpose and Need

The purpose of the DAF Proposed Action is to obtain new airspace that affords the 71 FTW autonomous scheduling and ensures nearby access to airspace necessary to perform low-altitude non-hazardous flight training from 500 feet above ground level (AGL) up to 7,999 feet above mean sea level (MSL), and allows for continuous flight training to 24,000 feet MSL or scheduled independently (500 feet AGL to 7,999 feet MSL), as needed, to support new multidirectional tactical flying training requirements.

The Proposed Action is needed because pilots do not have regular, prioritized (scheduling / management of airspace) access to multidirectional, low altitude training down to 500 feet AGL (low altitude / configuration), with ceilings of 7,999 feet AGL (size), within minimal transit time from Vance AFB. The minimal transit time (approximately 10 minutes) accommodates aircraft fuel requirements and necessary training time in the airspace.

The FAA's purpose and need for the Proposed Action is to provide the SUA to support DAF undergraduate pilot training requirements while minimizing impacts on the National Airspace System.

Proposed Action and Alternatives

Under the Proposed Action, the DAF would obtain new low-altitude airspace to support low-altitude pilot training requirements of the FBF syllabus. The proposed low-altitude airspace would need to have a floor of 500 feet AGL and a ceiling of up to 7,999 feet MSL. Training within the proposed airspace would primarily consist of low-altitude air-to-ground training, which would simulate attacks by training aircraft against simulated ground-based targets. This type of training would occur between 500 feet AGL and 3,000 feet MSL.

Up to 1,458 aircraft operations would occur in the proposed airspace annually. Most aircraft operations (1,170) in the proposed airspace would be performed by pilots from the 71 FTW at

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Vance AFB flying the T-38C *Talon* (T-38C). Up to 288 annual operations would also be performed by Oklahoma ANG pilots flying F-16C aircraft as 71 FTW scheduling and operational requirements allow. Generally, low-altitude training operations would be performed in the proposed airspace between 8:00 a.m. and 9:00 p.m. Monday through Friday and 2:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. on Sundays, local time. Operations that would be required outside of those hours would be coordinated between the DAF and FAA and publicized via Notices to Airmen. No operations would be performed in the proposed airspace during nighttime hours (local sunset to sunrise, adjusted seasonally as needed) or on federal holidays.

The DAF initially considered six alternatives for implementing the Proposed Action. Five alternatives were dismissed because they did not meet selection standards used to identify alternatives that would meet the purpose and need. Alternatives retained for detailed analysis in the attached EA are summarized below.

Alternative 1 – Establish Vance 1E Low-Altitude Military Operations Area

Alternative 1 would implement the Proposed Action described above. Under this alternative, the DAF would request FAA to establish a new low-altitude Military Operations Area (MOA) under portions of the existing Vance 1A, 1C, and 1D MOAs. The new airspace would be designated as the Vance 1E Low MOA. The proposed MOA would have a floor of 500 feet AGL and a ceiling of up to 7,999 feet MSL (directly beneath the floor of the existing Vance Airspace Complex). The proposed MOA would encompass approximately 1,051 square miles of airspace except for avoidance areas around existing airports. The proposed MOA would be managed and operated separately from the existing Vance 1D MOA and could be combined with that airspace, as needed, to support seamless flight operations from 500 feet AGL to Flight Level 240 (approximately 24,000 feet MSL). Training activities would occur in the proposed MOA as described above for the Proposed Action.

Alternative 1 would not involve changes to the lateral boundaries of the existing Vance Airspace Complex. No demolition, construction, or other ground-disturbing activities would occur under Alternative 1. None of the proposed training activities would involve releases of live or inert ammunition or ordnance (including defensive countermeasures such as chaff and flares). No supersonic aircraft operations would occur in the proposed airspace. Alternative 1 would not require changes to the number of personnel or to the number or types of aircraft assigned to Vance AFB, or changes to the existing boundaries of that or any other DoD or DAF installation.

No Action Alternative

Under the No Action Alternative, the proposed low-altitude MOA would not be obtained. Vance AFB pilots would be required to seek the availability of other existing MOAs to conduct low-altitude training, resulting in operational inefficiencies and continuing to limit time spent in actual training.

The No Action Alternative does not meet the purpose and need but is carried forward for detailed analysis in the EA. The No Action Alternative provides a baseline for the evaluation of potential impacts from the Proposed Action and also represents a potential and viable decision to not implement the Proposed Action.

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Summary of Findings

The summary of findings presented below is based on the detailed analysis provided in the attached EA. Throughout this proposed FONSI and the attached EA, the terms “environmental consequences,” “effects,” and “impacts” are used interchangeably and have the same meaning.

Airspace

The Proposed Action would have no significant adverse impacts on airspace. Based on the number of proposed aircraft operations and the number of hourly and daily crossings in the existing and proposed airspace, the proposed MOA would have the size and volume to absorb additional air traffic associated with Alternative 1. Vance Air Traffic Control (ATC) and FAA would review controller workload at the control centers to ensure the safe and efficient handling of any increases in air traffic. As established by FAA letter of agreement with Vance AFB and the 71 FTW, Vance ATC and FAA control centers would procedurally deconflict air traffic flying under Instrument Flight Rules (IFR), including both military and civilian IFR operators, by restricting military operations by sector or by altitude band, as needed, to route crossing air traffic through the remaining airspace. Air traffic flying under Visual Flight Rules in the proposed MOA would continue to use “see and avoid” flying to prevent conflicts. In compliance with 14 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 73, Special Use Airspace, and FAA Order 7400.2, Vance AFB ATC and pilots would observe exclusion zones around Alva Regional Airport, Freedom Municipal Airport, Farney Field, May Field, Medicine Lodge Airport, and Walz Airport to avoid or minimize impacts on IFR airport operators. As necessary, deconfliction procedures for ongoing aircraft operations in existing Military Training Routes (MTRs) and the proposed MOA would be codified in an approved written agreement with Vance AFB authorities to schedule operations safely and effectively.

Noise / Acoustic Environment

The Proposed Action would have no significant adverse impacts from noise. Estimated cumulative noise levels from aircraft operations in the proposed MOA and existing Vance 1A, 1C, and 1D MOAs, and estimated noise levels from aircraft operations on MTR segments that cross the existing and proposed MOAs, would not exceed 47 A-weighted decibels (dBA), including noise levels at potential noise-sensitive land uses under or near the proposed MOA. Some noise increases associated with aircraft operations in the proposed MOA would be considered “reportable,” but none would be considered “significant” in accordance with FAA Order 1050.1. Areas under the proposed MOA would remain well below the 65 dBA threshold below which most types of land uses are compatible with aircraft noise. Noise from aircraft operations under Alternative 1 would not be expected to temporarily or permanently impede or prevent the continued occupation of any land use underlying the proposed MOA, existing Vance 1A, 1C, and 1D MOAs, and associated Air Traffic Control Assigned Airspace (ATCAA).

Individual noise events from proposed aircraft operations under Alternative 1 would be heard at various locations on the ground but would be brief and unlikely to cause annoyance or disrupt common activities any more than typical everyday events (e.g., automobile noise, lawn mowing, other civil aircraft flyovers), and would not exceed exposure limits that could result in hearing loss. Any potential interference with speech in indoor settings would also be brief due to the short nature of individual noise events (planes flying at hundreds of miles per hour). Flight paths would

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typically be distributed throughout the airspace such that the highest overflight noise levels would not be expected to occur repeatedly at a single location on the ground.

Land Use

The Proposed Action would have no significant adverse impacts on land use. Alternative 1 would have no potential to result in development activities or population changes that would require changes to existing or proposed land use patterns or be inconsistent with existing land use plans and policies. Cumulative noise levels from proposed aircraft operations would be similar to existing ambient noise conditions and would not exceed the 65 dBA threshold below which most types of land use are compatible with aircraft noise. Overall, Alternative 1 would have no potential to require temporary or permanent changes to existing or proposed land uses, prevent the continued use and occupation of existing land uses, or result in incompatibilities with existing or planned land uses, plans, and policies.

The Proposed Action could make it more difficult to site new wind farms on the land under the proposed MOA. However, in most cases, the DoD Siting Clearinghouse, through its mitigation response team process finds a compromise where turbine projects can proceed under MOAs if some or many of the turbines are moved laterally or other types of mitigation strategies are implemented. In addition, much of the airspace within the proposed MOA area is already subject to DoD Siting Clearinghouse review because six existing low-level MTRs cross the airspace. As needed, the DoD would evaluate any utility-scale wind turbine development projects proposed on lands under the proposed MOA and would engage with the developer(s) through the DoD Siting Clearinghouse process to identify mitigation measures to avoid flight obstruction impacts on proposed low-altitude aircraft operations.

Air Quality and Greenhouse Gases

The Proposed Action would have no significant adverse impacts on air quality and greenhouse gases (GHG). Emissions of criteria pollutants regulated by the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) would increase as a result of proposed aircraft operations under Alternative 1, but estimated emission increases for each criteria pollutant would be less than their associated insignificance indicator values. These estimated net increases in criteria pollutant emissions would not be expected to result in an exceedance of the NAAQS for any criteria pollutant or cause an adverse impact on the attainment status of Air Quality Control Regions associated with counties underlying the proposed MOA. Increases in GHG associated with Alternative 1 would account for approximately 0.0046 percent of total GHG emissions in the state of Kansas (and a smaller increase relative to total GHG emissions in Oklahoma) and as such, would not result in significant impacts from GHG at a regional or global scale.

Biological Resources

The Proposed Action would have no significant adverse impacts on biological resources. Alternative 1 would have no effect on vegetation (including invasive species) or habitat because no construction, demolition, or other ground-disturbing activities would occur. Alternative 1 would have no effect on federally designated critical habitat because none is present under the proposed airspace. It is anticipated that wildlife and domestic animals would generally habituate to noise and visual elements associated with aircraft operating in the proposed MOA. Given the large (1,051-square mile) area where the training would occur, that most training would occur during daytime hours (8:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. local time, adjusted seasonally), and the relatively

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low numbers of sorties proposed (1,458 annually, which would equate to an average of approximately 4 sorties per day), the likelihood for birds to encounter aircraft during training operations would remain low. Pilots would follow additional avoidance procedures during low-altitude training if the risk of collisions between aircraft and birds increased. Although the inadvertent injury or death of birds from collisions with aircraft operating in the proposed MOA would represent an adverse impact, such impacts would occur at the individual level and would not permanently impede or prevent the continued foraging, breeding, nesting, or migration of common bird species or wildlife at the community, population, or species level. Any “take” of birds protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act would be small on an annual basis and would be considered incidental to military readiness activities in accordance with 50 CFR § 21.42.

In accordance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, the DAF has determined that the Proposed Action may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect the federally threatened lesser prairie chicken (*Tympanuchus pallidicinctus*), piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*), rufa red knot (*Calidris canutus rufa*), or the federally endangered whooping crane (*Grus americana*); and would not jeopardize the continued existence of the proposed endangered tricolored bat (*Perimyotis subflavus*) or proposed threatened monarch butterfly (*Danaus Plexippus*). The Proposed Action would have *no effect* on the Arkansas river shiner (*Notropis girardi*) or the peppered chub (*Macrhybopsis tetranema*) because no earth disturbance or in-water activities would occur. Concurrence with these determinations by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is pending.

Cultural Resources

The Proposed Action would have no significant impacts on cultural resources. Noise levels associated with Alternative 1 would not exceed 47 dBA and would remain well below 65 dBA. Any such increases occurring at historic properties listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) would be brief and relatively infrequent and would be unlikely to affect the integrity or character-defining features of those properties. Alternative 1 would not physically disturb, alter, or otherwise affect NRHP-listed or -eligible architectural or archaeological resources (surface or subsurface) because no construction, demolition, or other ground-disturbing activities would occur. Alternative 1 would have no potential to affect traditional cultural properties or Indian sacred sites because no such properties or sites have been identified in the Area of Potential Effect.

Per guidance set forth in 36 CFR § 800.5, the DAF has determined that the Proposed Action would have no adverse effect on historic properties. In a letter dated March 11, 2025, the Oklahoma State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) stated that there are no historic properties affected by the Proposed Action. The Kansas SHPO’s concurrence with the DAF’s determination is pending.

Safety

The Proposed Action would have no significant adverse impacts on safety. Areas under the existing and proposed Vance MOAs and associated ATCAA and MTRs are sparsely populated, and the probability of an aircraft mishap over a populated area would be minimized by the limited amount of time an aircraft would be over any specific location. Strict control and use of established safety procedures would minimize the potential for aircraft mishaps and safety risks. General flight safety risks and bird-aircraft strike hazard (BASH) risks would be assessed for flights lower than 1,000 feet AGL, and pilots would follow additional avoidance procedures outlined in the Vance AFB BASH Plan during low-altitude training as applicable. All flight operations in the proposed MOA would be conducted in accordance with procedures established in applicable DAF

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regulations and orders with the safety of its pilots and people in the surrounding communities as the primary concern.

Socioeconomics

The Proposed Action would have no significant adverse impacts on socioeconomics. Alternative 1 would not involve any activities that could result in changes in population, employment, income, or other social or economic activity in areas under the existing and proposed Vance MOAs. Increased noise levels from aircraft operating at lower altitudes in the proposed MOA would be comparable to existing conditions and not frequent enough, or loud enough, to permanently impede or prevent the continued occupation or operation of underlying land uses, including those where concentrations of persons under the age of 18 or over 65 years of age could be present. Alternative 1 would not affect the economic activity or output of municipal and regional airfields or notably impede the movement of people and goods because Vance AFB air traffic control would implement and adhere to applicable airspace deconfliction procedures in accordance with its FAA-delegated authority to ensure the safe operation and transit or avoidance of the proposed airspace by commercial and general aviation aircraft.

Visual Resources

The Proposed Action would have no significant adverse impacts on visual resources. Military training operations in airspace over northern Oklahoma and southern Kansas have occurred on a nearly continuous basis since Vance AFB was established in 1941. Alternative 1 does not involve construction, demolition, or other earth-disturbing activities and therefore, would not introduce new permanent or temporary buildings, structures, or other constructed, inanimate features or light sources into the existing visual landscape, nor would it change, modify, remove, or otherwise alter existing topography, vegetation, or other naturally occurring features. Therefore, Alternative 1 would have no permanent impacts on visual resources, including from light emissions.

Aircraft operating in the proposed airspace at altitudes as low as 500 feet AGL would likely be visible to viewers under or near the proposed MOA, given the relatively clear weather conditions that occur most days in the area; however, these operations would consist of jet aircraft traveling at hundreds of miles per hour and their appearance in the overlying airspace would be brief (likely less than a few minutes) at any given time as observed from a particular location. Low-altitude aircraft operations in the proposed airspace would also be distributed throughout an approximately 1,051-square mile area, further minimizing the appearance of aircraft at any particular location under or near the proposed MOA. Aircraft operations in the existing and proposed Vance MOAs are already part of the existing visual landscape, and aircraft operations under Alternative 1 would not introduce a new visual element that is not already commonly observed in areas under or near the proposed MOA.

Reasonably Foreseeable Future Actions

When considered with other reasonably foreseeable future actions occurring in and around the proposed Vance 1E Low MOA, the Proposed Action would not contribute to significant adverse impacts on resources analyzed in the EA.

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Mitigation

No project-specific best management practices or environmental commitments are identified in the EA; however, the use of best management practices is assumed, when applicable, in the discussion of environmental consequences for each resource analyzed in the EA.

Public Involvement

A Notice of Availability for the Draft EA and proposed FONSI was published in the *Enid Daily News and Eagle*, *Alva Review Courier*, and *Kiowa Tri-County Tribune* inviting the public to review and comment on the Draft EA during the 30-day public comment period. The Draft EA and proposed FONSI were made available for public review at local public libraries in Enid and Alva, Oklahoma and online at <https://www.vance.af.mil/>. Comments on the Draft EA will be addressed in the Final EA and FONSI, as applicable.

Finding of No Significant Impact

After review of the attached EA, which was prepared in accordance with the requirements of NEPA, I have determined that the Proposed Action including Alternative 1 to obtain a new permanent low-altitude airspace for the 71 FTW at Vance AFB, would not have a significant impact on the quality of the human or natural environment. Accordingly, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared. This decision has been made after considering all submitted information, including review of any public and agency comments received during the 30-day public comment period, and considering a full range of reasonable alternatives that meet project requirements and are within the legal authority of the DAF.

CHARLES D. THROCKMORTON IV, Col, USAF
Commander

DATE