



DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY
NAVAL AIR STATION
JACKSONVILLE, FLORIDA 32212-5000

IN REPLY REFER TO:
5090
Ser 00/163
15 Apr 13

Dear Respondent:

SUBJECT: ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (EA) FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A RESTRICTED AREA WITHIN THE ST. JOHNS RIVER FOR SEARCH AND RESCUE (SAR) TRAINING AT NAVAL AIR STATION JACKSONVILLE (NASJAX) FLORIDA (FL)

The Department of the Navy (DON) is preparing an EA for the proposed establishment of a restricted area for SAR training, NASJAX FL. The purpose of this letter is to seek scoping comments that will assist the DON in project planning and analysis in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969.

The EA will assess the potential effects of the proposed action and project alternatives. Please find enclosed a description of the project and maps showing the location of the project area. Based on the information presented, the DON respectfully requests that your agency identify any specific information, issues, or concerns that should be included in the EA and would facilitate the decision making process. We would appreciate receiving your comments no later than May 23, 2013.

If you have any questions about this project, please contact Mr. Stephen Biemiller by e-mail at stephen.biemiller@navy.mil, or by telephone at (904) 542-6871. Written comments may be sent to: Commanding Officer, Naval Facilities Engineering Command Southeast, ATTN: Mr. Stephen Biemiller, Project Manager, NEPA Compliance Section (EV21), Box 30, Building 903, NAS Jacksonville, FL 32212-0030. Your assistance in this project scoping effort is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. W. Sanders", is written over the typed name.

R. W. SANDERS
Captain, U.S. Navy
Commanding Officer

Enclosures: 1. Project Description
2. Site Map

ENCLOSURE 1

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Background

Naval Air Station (NAS) Jacksonville is a multi-mission Navy installation located in northeast Florida, along the western shore of the St. Johns River within the City of Jacksonville. The proposed search and rescue (SAR) restricted area is located offshore of NAS Jacksonville (Enclosure 2). The proposed restricted area forms a 260-acre rectangle within the St. Johns River at the latitude/longitude coordinates identified in Enclosure 2.

SAR training involves use of one or two helicopters (typically a type of SH-60 or MH-60 Sea Hawk) and one 40-foot (12 meters) harbor patrol boat. The boat remains on location as a safety precaution and to maximize training by transporting additional swimmers to the jump site. Swimmers on board the boat could initially play the “survivor” role and those on board the helicopter could serve as the “swimmer” during a rescue simulation. The boat typically remains stationary during the event once on location, with intermittent movements based on the need to alternate swimmers and survivors. Alternating roles helps maximize the number of persons able to obtain rescue swimmer qualification during a single training event. Swimmers are required to complete multiple day and night jumps and hoisting events to become a qualified SAR swimmer.

Each training evolution begins with a survivor entering the water and a helicopter descending to a stationary hover near the survivor at an altitude of 15 feet (4.6 meters) or establishing itself at approximately 10 feet (3 meters) making 10 knots headway. The helicopter stays at this low altitude just long enough to “jump” (deploy) a swimmer. Once the swimmer signals his or her safety, the helicopter climbs to and maintains an altitude of 40 – 80 feet (12.2 – 24.4 meters) to avoid rotor wash spray. Once in the water, the swimmer completes a simulated rescue, and the helicopter uses its winch to hoist the swimmer and survivor back aboard the helicopter. Each helicopter is capable of carrying up to eight swimmers to complete multiple jumps during a single event.

The overwater flight portion of a SAR swimmer training event by a squadron helicopter is typically four hours. As many as 24 jumps could be completed over the course of the four-hour event, with only one event occurring on any given day. SAR training events are usually scheduled to start two to three hours prior to and end one to two hours after sunset, so that day and night jumps can be completed during a single event while allowing the boat and helicopter to remain on station. There are a total of approximately 36 days of training per year, held at various times throughout the year.

Proposed Action

The proposed action is to establish a restricted area in the St. Johns River offshore from NAS Jacksonville in which to conduct SAR training. Section 334.2(b) of Title 33 of the CFR defines a restricted area as: "A defined water area for the purpose of prohibiting or limiting public access to the area. Restricted areas generally provide security for Government property and/or

protection to the public from the risks of damage or injury arising from the Government's use of that area." Establishing a restricted area as proposed would protect SAR trainees and watercraft from potential injury or damage from unintended collisions with submerged crab traps. It would also prevent delays or cancellations of training in order to maintain safety, and it would prevent damage to traps. It would also have some effect on crabbing in that portion of the river by preventing the anchoring of crab traps in the restricted area.

Purpose & Need

The purpose of the proposed action is to restrict the placement or anchoring of objects or devices, such as crab traps, within the proposed restricted area at all times, and prohibit public access during training exercises. The proposed action is needed because the presence of obstructions in the SAR training area cause unsafe training conditions and can cause the SAR training to be delayed or cancelled. The reason the restricted activities constitute safety hazards is that they increase risk of damage, mishap, or injury to the trainees, support staff, and to the public. Unauthorized vessels or swimmers, and anything anchored to the river bottom, have the strong potential to cause severe injury to a SAR training swimmer, especially when deploying from an overflying helicopter. They also detract from the value of training by requiring cancellation of exercises if there are vessels, swimmers, objects, or devices transiting, entering, moored in, located in, or anchored in the training area, which cause unsafe training conditions.

Alternatives

Alternatives to be evaluated in the Environmental Assessment include:

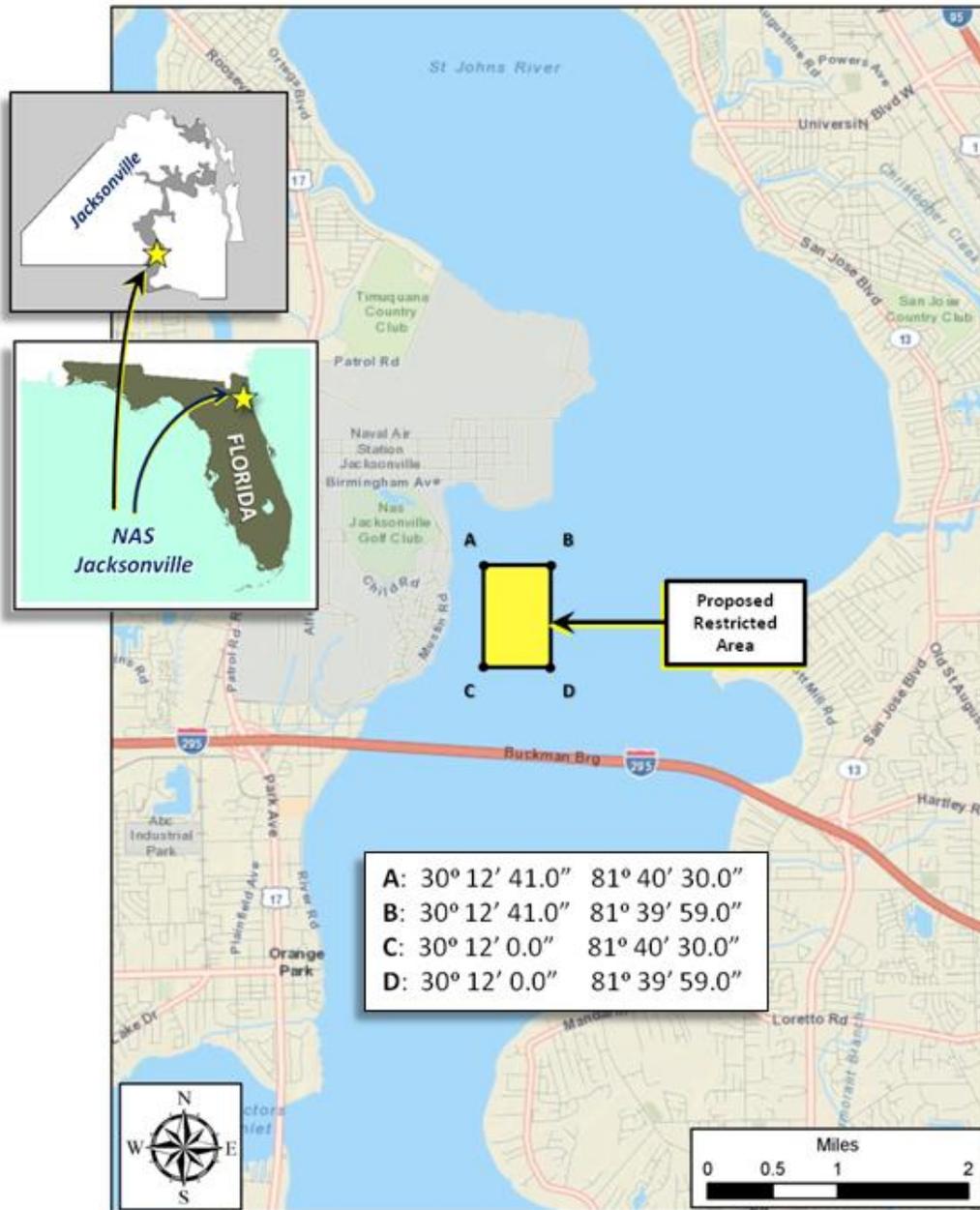
Alternative 1 - Preferred Alternative; the proposed action to restrict public access as described above. The anchoring of objects, such as crab traps, would be prohibited, but it may not necessarily be prohibited, for example, for manned recreational vessels to temporarily anchor in the restricted area, except during training exercises.

Alternative 2 - discontinuing all SAR training in the St. Johns River, thereby eliminating the need to establish a restricted area.

Alternative 3 - No Action alternative; includes continuing SAR training but without establishing a restricted area. The No Action alternative provides a baseline for the analysis and comparison to the action alternatives. The evaluation of the No Action alternative is required by Council on Environmental Quality and Navy regulations, and involves the Navy taking no action regarding the status of establishing a restricted area. There would be no restricted area established for SAR training under the No Action alternative.

ENCLOSURE 2

SITE MAPS



Offices as racing and other private buoys are not all listed in the U.S. Coast Guard Light List.
NOAA Navigational Chart #11492

