



United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Washington, D.C. 20240

ADDRESS ONLY THE DIRECTOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

April 7, 2008

Mr. Kevin Cloe
Project Manager
Commander Atlantic Division
Naval Facilities Engineering Command
6506 Hampton Boulevard
Norfolk, VA 23508-1278

Re: Review of the Draft Work Plan for Munitions and Explosives of Concern, Subsurface Removal Action, Beaches and Select Roadways, February 2008

Dear Mr. Cloe:

Thank you for the opportunity to review the aforementioned document prepared by CH2M Hill, for the Department of the Navy, Naval Facilities Engineering Command, Atlantic Division. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has completed our review and enclosed you will find our comments

If you have any questions, please contact me at (973) 906-6987. Thank you for your time and consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

Richard Henry
Vieques Project Manager
Division of Environmental Quality
US Fish and Wildlife Service

cc: Josefina Gonzalez, EQB, w/ encl.
Daniel Rodriguez EPA, w/ encl.
John Tomik, CH2M Hill, w/ encl

Fish and Wildlife Service Comments
Draft
Work Plan for Munitions and Explosives of Concern
Subsurface Removal Action
Beaches and Select Roadways
February 2008

General Comments

Overall, the document is well written and in particular, the Quality Control Plan will allow a through audit of the clearance efforts in the study area.

Munitions and Explosives of Concern (MEC) Work in the Eastern Conservation Area (ECA)

The Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) recommends that a somewhat different approach be considered in the ECA. Although threatened and endangered plant species have not yet been found, a relatively unique and sensitive vegetation type exists in the ECA, and any work in this area should be coordinated with the FWS prior to commencement. For now, the FWS does not recommend the use of traditional vegetation removal to facilitate the identification of surface MEC in the ECA area.

The FWS understands that the Navy is considering the use of aerial magnetometry on Vieques. Because of the relatively low height of the vegetation present, the ECA is well suited for the application of this type of technology.

The FWS understands that numerous vegetation transects were carried out as part of the January 2007 Biological Assessment (BA) amendment. Over 48 individual north/south transects were covered, all of which included MEC avoidance. It would be beneficial to the current investigation to review the list of MEC found along those transects.

The Road to Punta Este Along the Northern Section of the ECA This road is located on limestone rock and is within an area of highly sensitive and unique vegetation. The road may not be needed if maintenance to the existing aid to navigation at the end of Punta Este is not required. If this is the case, the road can be replaced with a hiking trail or all-terrain vehicle (ATV) track instead of a standard vehicular road. Close coordination with the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) will be required to determine the extent of risk reduction required for this area.

Access Requirements for Natural Resource Needs During the February 2008 CERCLA Technical Committee meeting, a draft document including access requirements for immediate and short-term natural resource needs of the Vieques NWR was distributed by the FWS. This document indicated that additional trails will require MEC risk reduction to allow access by ATVs as well as the mower equipped tractors required for maintenance. In addition, the document prioritized the beaches for future clearance on the basis of existing data regarding sea turtle nesting activity. These additional trails and beach priorities should be included in the

Work Plan (WP).

Sea Turtle Habitat as Outlined in the Existing BA Beach sea turtle recommendations are site-specific and the vegetation clearance setbacks for each beach segment are included in the figures. A discussion of the various restrictions associated with each beach should be reviewed with FWS prior to the start of work, and with field supervisors and vegetation clearance crews during Pre-Construction, Kickoff, and Safety Meetings. The FWS requests that the Navy closely monitor work activities to assure compliance with the Applicable or Relevant and Appropriate Requirements and the BA, and will participate in the field as needed.

Specific Comments

Executive Summary

Page v, Line 6 - 7 It is unclear what is meant by “Changed site conditions may lead to a need for additional actions in the future to support the land use.” For example, does this mean that the Navy will return to those portions of the study area following storm events or maintenance activities that have altered the landscape to the extent that undetected munitions were exposed?

Page v, Lines 32 - 33 The impression is given that road clearance of one or 2-feet meets the future land use objectives. It is not acceptable to use generic clearance depths for public and refuge roads, nor does it assure reduction of risk.

Page v, Lines 35 - 36 Although the potential for erosion varies as a function of soil type, topography, and the particular characteristics of an area, it is reasonable to expect that all unpaved road surfaces erode to a certain extent during significant storm and runoff events. This should be acknowledged here and in the appropriate sections of the document. Additionally, the portions of the document that talk about erosion and non-erosion impacted roadways should include the criteria for classification in these categories. The discussion in paragraph 2 and 3 of Section 2.4.4 should be summarized in this portion of the Executive Summary.

Section 1 Introduction

Section 1.1 Response Action Objectives

Page 1-1, Lines 19 - 20 As mentioned above, it is unclear what is meant by “Changed site conditions may lead to a need for additional actions in the future to support the land use.” For example, does this mean that the Navy will return to those portions of the study area following storm events or maintenance activities that have altered the landscape to the extent that undetected munitions were exposed?

Section 1.3.1 Scope

Page 1-2, Lines 15 - 20 During the December 2007 Munitions Response Committee conference call, the FWS recommended that beaches be classified simply as sandy beaches and rocky

beaches, and this is reflected in Table 2-1 of the document. However, Section 1.3.1 continues to refer to public use beaches, documented sea turtle nesting areas and restricted public access (non-public use, non-turtle nesting). It is important to note (and partially based on Navy data) that all sandy beaches on Vieques have the potential to provide nesting habitat for sea turtles. Likewise all sandy beaches on Vieques have the potential to attract public use either by land or by sea. The FWS plans to monitor all the beaches that have the potential for sea turtle nesting, not just the previously documented ones. Additionally, the Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) indicates that the FWS plans to open most of the beaches to the public, at least on a seasonal basis.

Page 1-3, Lines 6 - 7 and 32 - 33 It is requested that the Navy informally consult with the FWS prior to any vegetation removal activities to verify that appropriate measures will be taken to protect habitat and minimize devegetation.

Page 1-3, Lines 8 - 9 and 34 - 35 It is requested that the Navy informally consult with the FWS prior to any survey activities to ensure the protection of threatened and endangered species and their habitat.

Page 1-3, Lines 21 - 27 Most roads and trails within the former Vieques Naval Training Range and the Naval Ammunition Support Detachment were transferred to the FWS in serviceable condition. At the time of the transfer, and to a large degree to the present, many of these roads were closed (including to FWS use) due to safety considerations. According the Department of the Interior / U.S. Navy Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), the Navy is required to maintain roads needed for cleanup activities. Many of the roads not used and those infrequently used have become overgrown with vegetation and seriously eroded, and are, in some areas, not accessible by conventional vehicles. Prior to digital geophysical mapping, it is recommend that the original road width be reacquired and surveyed, and that the buffer areas be established from the edge of the original road and not from the existing road edge or road centerline.

Page 1-2, Line 13 and Figures 1-1 and 1-2 It should be noted that, due to scale issues, the legend descriptors are not discernable on the figures. This is the case, but to a lesser extent, in the figures included in Appendix C. Additionally, the use of these descriptors has not been clarified in the associated text.

Section 2 Technical Management Plan

Section 2.4 Technical Approach

Section 2.4.2 Site Preparation - Vegetation Removal

Page 2-3, Lines 23 - 24 and Page 2-4, Lines 1 - 5 As mentioned above, it is requested that the Navy informally consult with the FWS prior to any vegetation removal activities to verify that appropriate measures will be taken to protect habitat and minimize devegetation. This consultation should occur prior to the Pre-Construction, Kick-Off or Safety Meetings.

Section 2.4.2 Site Preparation - Subsurface MEC Removal

Page 2-4, Line 20, Table 2-1 The roads in Solid Waste Management Unit-04 have been designated as "Zone 2 roads" due to their position within the 3000-foot radius from Monitor Well-01 rather than their position within projected range fans.

There are two road designations in the WP: Zone 1 roads are those outside of range safety fans, where MEC items are not expected, and with a clearance depth of 1-foot. Zone 2 roads are those within the range safety fans, where MEC items are more likely to be expected, and with a surface clearance depth of 2-feet. There is a variable clearance depth for both Zone 1 and Zone 2 road areas that have the potential for erosion. As stated at the February 2008 MOA meeting, the FWS is in the process of upgrading roads and will bring the refuge road system to Federal Highway specifications in the future.

The WP fails to make a compelling argument regarding the proposed depths of clearance nor does it meet established procedures for clearances in areas where known intrusive efforts will occur in the future. As stated by the Department of Defense Explosive Safety Board, the default removal depth is 10-feet for unrestricted use (including construction), 4-feet for public use (including vehicle parking), and 1-foot for limited public access (including wildlife preserves).

As a prescriptive approach, the FWS recommends that road areas in the EMA and SIA that are traversed by quebradas or other water courses, are erosion prone, or are located on sandy, soft or deep soils be cleared to the depth of detection; road areas on rocky soils be cleared to 4-feet; and road areas on bedrock or with shallow bedrock be cleared to depth of bedrock. Although it is acknowledged that MEC avoidance support will still be required for construction, this recommendation will reduce the risk of future road surface grading and routine maintenance for FWS workers and their contractors. While these depths are intended to serve as starting points for the planned MEC cleanup, it is anticipated by the FWS that site specific information (in particular, the data collected per paragraphs 2 and 3 of Section 2.4.4) will be used to determine the actual clearance depths for various and specific parts of the Vieques NWR.

The FWS also recommends that a Zone 3 road category be created which would consist of the roadways in the LIA. Since this area is likely to have the highest density of MEC, it should receive clearance to the depth of detection on all road areas and buffer zones that are not on bedrock. While not open to the public, these roads will be used and maintained by the FWS for wildlife management purposes. Because of infrequent use, soil type, and location, these roads would also be more likely to suffer erosion and inundation. Again, it is anticipated by the FWS that site specific information will be used to determine the actual clearance depths.

Page 2-4, Lines 24 - 30 While it is understood that approximately 5 percent of the anomalies not resolved will be evaluated to depth, the specific objective and details of this approach need to be clarified. Moreover, the use of this information relative to the removal action needs to be clearly stated (i.e., will additional removal actions be initiated should the deeper excavations suggest the presence of MEC).

Page 2-4, Line 31 Based on the language in this section, it is assumed that 5 percent of the unresolved anomalies in each individual beach area and road section will be evaluated to depth.

Page 2-4, Lines 33 - 35 The FWS requests that the participating parties be involved in the data review and selection of anomalies to be resolved to a deeper depth.

Page 2-5, Line 3 and Figure 2-2 It is assumed that the data usability process will be applied to each beach area as well as each road area.

Page 2-5, Line 7 The projected delays between digital geophysical mapping and anomaly investigation may result in a significant increase in cost. It is suggested that the tasks be scheduled in a manner that will not require dynamic areas to be remapped.

Page 2-5, Lines 17, 19, and 21 It is assumed that the term “not sufficiently comparable” means that the locations of the anomalies are not within 1-meter of the originally mapped location.

Page 2-5, Lines 35 - 38 and Page 2-6, Lines 1 - 4 As written, this step of the procedure is somewhat confusing. In particular, the text referring to the bending of the flag and the use of a Schonstedt and EM61-MK2 needs to be clarified.

Page 2-6, Lines 5 - 18 As above, Steps 4 and 5 require clarification. The entire procedure (Steps 1 - 5) is aimed at excavation of anomalies, yet Step 5 is taken in the event that intrusive activity is not taken.