

**MONTANA AIR NATIONAL GUARD (MTANG) TRAINING RANGE,
BLAINE & PHILLIPS COUNTY**

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The MTANG proposed developing an air-to-ground training area within the Hays Military Operating Area (MOA) in Blaine County about three miles west of the Fort Belknap Reservation and two miles north of the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument. It included 720 acres of public land in scattered tracts, most of which are identified for disposal in the West HiLine Resource Management Plan (RMP). The Air Force issued an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in February 2002. The MTANG planned to establish the leases with the local landowners prior to going forward with DOI legislative action to transfer the public land. The estimated timeframe to have the 30-year leases in place was April/May 2004.

In March 2004, negotiations with the land owners broke off and now the MTANG is contemplating developing Alternative 3 in southern Phillips County; T. 26 and 27 N., R. 31 E, about 20 miles south of Malta. Discussions with the landowners have started. Malta Field Office resource specialists met with a MTANG representative on July 9.

ISSUES:

The Hays MOA has been used for air-to-air training by the 120th Fighter Wing (FW), based at the Great Falls International Airport, for more than 25 years. Due to a mission change, the 120th FW is seeking a Montana location for essential air-to-ground training. Currently this training is accomplished by flying to training ranges in Utah and Idaho. In 1998, the Air Force and tribal officials began to discuss the possibility of developing a training range near the Fort Belknap Reservation that would provide local training opportunities as well as economic benefits.

The proposal would enhance use of the Hays MOA to include a target range for bombing and strafing by F16 aircraft. It would consist of a small controlled range in which up to four aircraft at a time would practice in coordination with a range control staff who would coordinate the activity, score accuracy, and monitor the range for safety. The munitions used would be inert: small "dummy" practice bombs and nonexplosive bullets. An impact area of about 640 acres would be laid out with dispersed targets and strafe pits. Around the impact area would be a larger safety zone (3x5 miles) with restricted public access. Support facilities would also be built in the safety zone. Employment opportunities include range management, target construction and maintenance, security, road maintenance, fire break maintenance, fire suppression, snow removal, communications and vehicle maintenance.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

The BLM was a cooperating agency in the EIS along with other state and federal agencies and the Fort Belknap Community Council. Dwight Hemple of the Department of the Interior is the current federal contact for facilitating a transfer and has draft legislative language. If this site is selected, the land use plan (Judith-Valley-Phillips RMP) will have to be amended to reflect the range authorization.

The proposed area would include about 4,300 acres of public land. Major resource values present on or near the public land tracts include grazing operations; dispersed recreation; and antelope, sage-grouse, mountain plover, prairie dog, and grassland bird habitat. As the EIS was being written, mountain plovers were being considered for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Since then, the Fish and Wildlife Service has decided not to list the mountain plover, but now the sage-grouse is being considered for listing. The proposed site is within extensive sage-grouse habitat which will require additional analysis before this site is approved.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The MTANG has worked closely with local BLM offices, landowners, state and local elected officials, tribal government, Montana's congressional delegation, and Defense and Interior staff. The proposal was publicized in major Montana newspapers in late 1999, with initial public scoping meetings in six communities. The Draft EIS was released August 3, 2001, followed by public hearings in Malta, Ft. Belknap, Lodgepole and Chinook. The public comment period closed September 24, 2001. A Fort Belknap traditional society expressed opposition to the proposal and a few comments on the Draft EIS were negative. There is strong support from county governments and most local residents.

CONTACT:

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