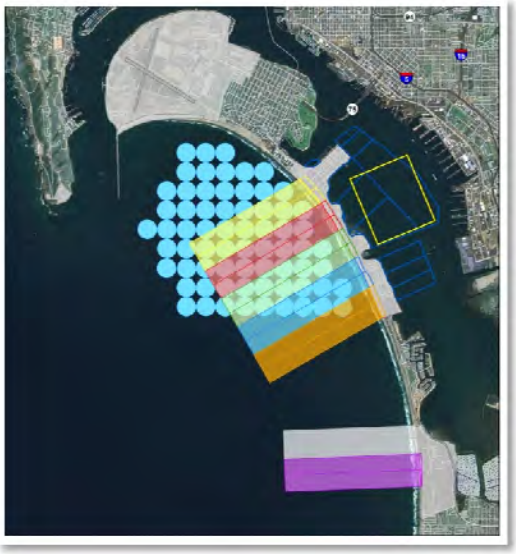
Silver Strand Training Complex EIS
FY12 CNO Environmental Planning Team Award

INTRODUCTION



Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet (COMPACFLT) submits this nomination for the Chief of Naval Operations Environmental Planning Team Award for the Silver Strand Training Complex (SSTC) Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The EIS team was formed to facilitate development of a thorough, comprehensive, and legally defensible EIS that would ensure fleet readiness and success of the military mission while minimizing the effects of training on the environment. The proposed action of the EIS was to ensure continued access to and availability of quality training opportunities at SSTC's vital training areas. The proposed action was implemented to meet critical Navy and Department of Defense current and near-term operational training requirements, especially those associated with the growth and emphasis on Naval Special Warfare Command.

The primary environmental goal was to prepare a comprehensive EIS in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and to successfully negotiate a Biological Opinion (BO) and Incidental Harassment Authorization (IHA) in compliance with the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Other critical elements of the EIS included the completion of an Essential Fish Habitat Assessment, Coastal Consistency Determination, and informal consultation for the green sea turtle. The team developed an extensive agenda of environmental planning objectives and required timelines that were integral to the success of meeting this goal. Close working relationships with regulators from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) greatly assisted COMPACFLT in achieving its objectives.

The EIS team faced significant challenges in the development of the EIS that included analyzing impacts to four threatened and endangered (T&E) marine species and three T&E terrestrial animal and plant species occurring on or in proximity to SSTC. With SSTC's proximity to the cities of Coronado, Imperial Beach, and San Diego, the EIS also included detailed analysis of potential acoustic, socioeconomic, and transportation impacts.

The EIS team was composed of Navy and contractor personnel with expertise in naval operations, exercise planning, environmental compliance and legal sufficiency, Geographic Information Systems, public involvement, marine and terrestrial resources, and program management. This vast array of expertise was required due to the complexity of the analyses to be completed in compliance with the Marine Mammals Protection Act (MMPA), Coastal Zone Management Act, ESA, and NEPA. The team composition and organization ensured the goal was met even when project requirements were continually changing.

BACKGROUND AND TEAM ORGANIZATION

Silver Strand Training Center is critical to Navy west coast naval amphibious, special warfare, and mine countermeasure training activities due to its proximity to the homeport of San Diego and other training ranges in the southwest; its proximity to military families, which supports flexibility in meeting personnel tempo requirements; and its unique training environment and terrain. In 1999, the Navy determined that preparation of an EIS for training activities on SSTC and the southern nearshore area of Naval Air Station North Island was necessary because of the high density of nesting birds that are federally threatened or endangered on oceanside training beaches, as well as the level of potential impact from the proposed action.

To meet the environmental planning objectives and succeed under schedule constraints, a multidisciplinary team with knowledge of the history of the project and state of the science was formed. The SSTC EIS team included members that are extremely knowledgeable in the complexities of this densely utilized range complex as well as biological experts familiar with regulatory background and issues related to T&E species. Key team members are listed in the table below.

Environmental Planning Team		
Name	**Title or Discipline**	**Organization**
Mr. Alex Stone	Project Manager	COMPACFLT
Ms. Delphine Lee	Environmental Planner	COMPACFLT
Mr. Chip Johnson	Marine Species Advisor	COMPACFLT
Ms. Amy Kelley	Project Manager	NAVFAC SW
Mr. Andy Yatsko	Cultural Resources	NAVFAC SW
Mr. Jere Diersing	Legal	NAVFAC SW
Ms. Kat Ostapuk	Land Use and Coastal Zone	Formerly CNRSW
Ms. Tiffany Shepherd	Terrestrial Biologist/Birds	NAVFAC SW
Mr. John Locke	Water Quality	NAVFAC SW
Mr. Ros Majam	Air Quality	NAVFAC SW
Mr. Kent Randall	Socioeconomics/Transportation	Formerly NAVFAC SW
Ms. Jenny Marshall	Range Sustainment	FACSFAC San Diego
Mr. Scott Penwell	Training	SPECWARCOM
Mr. Tim Latas	Range Sustainment/Airspace	NB Coronado (Contractor)
Ms. Karen Waller	Program Manager	SRS-Parsons Joint Venture
Mr. Bruce Campbell	Senior Environmental Planner	SRS-Parsons Joint Venture
Mr. Lawrence Wolski	Project Manager	SRS-Parsons Joint Venture
Mr. Lawrence Honma	Senior Scientist	Merkel and Associates
Mr. Lewis Michaelson	Principal	Katz and Associates
Ms. Breanna Flanagan	Senior Account Executive	Katz and Associates

Challenges overcome to achieve overall objective

On August 6, 2001, the Navy published a Notice of Intent to prepare this EIS in the Federal Register. However, it was not until January 2010 that the Draft EIS was released for public review, while the Final EIS was released in January 2011. The timeframe for the completion of the NEPA process for this EIS was extended beyond the usual timeframe due to the combination of the complicated and evolving nature of military training needs and schedules and the complexity of the biological, marine, and other natural resources issues present. Specifically, ESA Section 7 consultation with the USFWS for the California Least Tern and Western Snowy Plover was lengthy and complex, as were consultations and permitting with NMFS for marine mammals, sea turtles, and Essential Fish Habitat.

The EIS team also faced unforeseen circumstances. The Navy requested an MMPA IHA from NMFS on February 16, 2010. In its IHA request, the Navy identified four species of marine mammals potentially present within SSTC (gray whales, bottlenose dolphins, California sea lions, and harbor seals) that may be exposed to sound and pressure from Navy underwater detonation and Elevated Causeway system training. A Notice of Proposed Incidental Harassment Authorization and Request for Comments was published by NMFS in the Federal Register on October 19, 2010. On March 4, 2011, during an underwater detonation training exercise, a pod of long-beaked common dolphins were observed at SSTC. Because this species is not normally expected in the SSTC area, it had not been included in the IHA request. Based on this new information and in coordination with NMFS, the Navy revised its IHA application on October 12, 2011, to include exposures of long-beaked common dolphins as well as three other species not normally expected to be present in the area, but that could potentially occur (short-beaked common dolphin, Pacific white-sided dolphin, and Risso's dolphin). In addition, new mitigations were proposed specific to time-delayed firing devices. NMFS published a second Federal Register Notice on March 20, 2012, reflecting the Navy's additional species inclusion and time-delayed firing device mitigations. On July 17, 2012, NMFS issued the final annual IHA addressing the incidental take of marine mammals associated with SSTC in-water training activities.

Developing the SSTC EIS in the face of continuously changing science, varying schedules, and unforeseen circumstances was difficult at times, yet the SSTC EIS team worked together to develop a legally defensible product. The SSTC EIS team met on a bimonthly basis to discuss current events and actively manage the action plan and deliverable schedule throughout the lifetime of the project. Without the dedication, hard work, and perseverance of the entire SSTC EIS team, the development of a legally defensible product could not have been accomplished.

ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNING SUMMARY

Environmental Plans and Agreements

The Navy initiated the environmental analysis process in 2001, released a Draft EIS in January 2010 for public review, and released a Final EIS in January 2011. Development of the SSTC EIS included supporting documents that provided the analysis needed to determine potential

environmental impacts and identify protective measures necessary to minimize those impacts to the environment. Supporting documents included:

- Biological Assessments (BAs) to support the ESA process (Terrestrial BA, Final September 2006 with an update in May 2008 and Marine BA, April 2008)
- National Marine Fisheries Service Request for Letter of Authorization and two updates to the request (March 2008, April 2008, and May 2008)
- Coastal Consistency Determination (Final August 2008)
- Essential Fish Habitat Analysis (March 2010)
- Informal consultation on the green sea turtle (November 2010)

The team's overall objective was to ensure fleet readiness and success of the military mission while minimizing the effects of training on the environment. Specific objectives included:

- Complying with NEPA while simultaneously protecting threatened, endangered, or managed species and promoting their recovery
- Ensuring early and meaningful public involvement
- Delivering a legally defensible document

The Record of Decision was signed by the Assistant Secretary of the Navy (Energy, Installations, and Environment) (acting) on August 21, 2012.

Most Outstanding Features

Long History of ESA Compliance. The Navy has a long history of ESA compliance at SSTC. In 1984, as a result of an ESA Section 7 consultation with USFWS on impacts to the federally endangered California Least Tern (*Sternula antillarum browni*), the Navy set aside as a nesting area 75 acres of Navy training beach at Delta North and South. Since then, the California Least Tern population on SSTC has increased fiftyfold, from 20 nests in 1985 to over 1,000 nests in 2012, and nesting has expanded outside the boundaries of the former areas. In addition, a second species, the Western Snowy Plover (*Charadrius nivosus nivosus*), which nests within the same training beaches as the tern, received federal protection under the ESA when it was listed as threatened in 1993. Since the listing, the snowy plover population has grown from 11 nests on SSTC in 1992 to 69 nests in 2012. Consequently, the Navy engaged in recurring ESA Section 7 consultations over the years with the USFWS, and varying strategies have been implemented to adapt to the growing tern and plover nesting populations in order to meet evolving training needs at SSTC. In addition to expanded areas, previous USFWS BOs required the Navy to set aside three beach training lanes for nesting each April through September, resulting in training restrictions for 6 months out of the year. In connection with this EIS, the Navy entered into formal ESA Section 7 consultation with the USFWS in September 2008 to address the potential impacts to three species, the California Least Tern, Western Snowy Plover, and federally endangered San Diego Fairy Shrimp (*Branchinecta sandiegonensis*). On July 7, 2010, the USFWS issued a programmatic BO concluding that the level of incidental take resulting from implementation of the proposed increase in training was not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of any of the three species. The Navy team was able to successfully negotiate the terms of the BO with USFWS to allow the three formerly closed SSTC training lanes to re-open

to training during the nesting season. The BO also provides for less encumbered training by placing a cap on the total number of plover nests buffered at one time and by allowing operators to schedule foot traffic training within vernal pools occupied by the San Diego Fairy Shrimp if the pools are determined to be dry. These expanded and formerly off-limits areas provide to the warfighter greater than 50 additional acres of prime, centrally located training lands. The level of cooperation fostered by the Navy led ultimately to the successful consultation and BO from USFWS.

The Navy also conducted informal ESA consultation with NMFS for the green sea turtle. On November 17, 2010, NMFS submitted a letter of concurrence to the Navy that its proposed action may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect, the green sea turtle. As a result of the successful consultation process, the Navy and NMFS are collaborating together to equip turtles with sonic tags and analyze their movements within the San Diego Bay. For pile driving activities, this analysis will be used to determine the location of any green sea turtle in the area to minimize or avoid any impacts. It will also be used to evaluate and recalculate, if necessary, buffer zones surrounding pile driving activities. This was an innovative mitigation approach for addressing potential impacts to sea turtles.

MMPA Compliance. The Navy requested an MMPA IHA from NMFS on February 16, 2010. Based on new species presence information and in coordination with NMFS, the Navy revised its IHA application on October 12, 2011, to include exposures of long-beaked common dolphins as well as three other species not normally expected to be present in the area, but that could potentially occur. In addition, new mitigations were proposed specific to time-delayed firing devices. On July 17, 2012, NMFS issued the final annual IHA for SSTC addressing the incidental take of marine mammals associated with SSTC in-water training activities. The management of the consultation process and numerous meetings, calls, and discussions with NMFS by the SSTC EIS team ensured that the IHA was completed as expeditiously as possible.

Unique management techniques and methodologies

Unique to this project was the extensive concurrent effort by the team to complete all the required regulatory requirements for this highly complex action within an extremely important and sensitive coastal environment. Together, the team prepared a detailed Plan of Action and Milestones to ensure that all deadlines were met. The team's composition, perseverance, dedication, and contribution of hours of intense analysis and response to comments enabled the project to stay on track with no interruptions to COMPACFLT's training requirements.

Also unique to the project was a one-team approach consisting of the operators, Navy subject matter experts, contractors, and those in the chain of command. The SSTC EIS team focused on mission accomplishment and environmental stewardship and, in stressful times, reminded all of "one team, one goal." This project would not have been completed without the support of cooperating agencies, superiors in the chain of command, the regulators, the operators, the COMPACFLT, Naval Base Coronado and Naval Facilities Engineering Command staffs, and the contractors who took ownership of this project.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Objective Attained: NEPA Compliance and Protection of Protected Species

- Achieved full NEPA compliance through finalization of the EIS. The EIS supported the ESA BO and MMPA IHA.
- Finalized programmatic USFWS BO for SSTC. The Terrestrial Biological Assessment was extremely thorough and received favorable reviews by USFWS.

Objective Attained: Early and Meaningful Public Involvement

- Understood the equities of the regulators, the nongovernmental organizations, and the public by initiating a mutual exchange of information including focused interviews with local city officials and regulatory agencies including the Audubon Society, California Coastal Commission, California Department of Fish and Game, California Department of Parks and Recreation, San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board, NMFS,San Diego Association of Governments, San Diego Unified Port District, Sierra Club, Southwest Fisheries Science Center, U.S. Coast Guard Marine Safety Office, USFWS, and the YMCA.

- Helped the diverse public understand the issues in a reader-friendly format through a series of fact sheets provided on the project websites and at the public scoping meetings. Additionally, the local areas received numerous announcements in English and Spanish, as well as options in accordance with the American Disabilities Act.
- Communicated the strategic importance of SSTC and the Navy's commitment to protect natural and cultural resources through outreach materials.

Objective Attained: Legally Defensible Document

- Clearly and concisely analyzed potential impacts associated with military training activities for 16 resource areas: land use and recreation, geology and soils, air quality, hazardous materials, water resources, acoustic environment (terrestrial), marine biological resources, fish, marine mammals, sea turtles, terrestrial biological resources, birds, cultural resources, transportation and circulation, socioeconomics, and public health and safety.
- Prepared a concise and legally defensible NEPA document that complied with all necessary regulations while meeting the Navy's necessary strategic mission requirements.

Lessons Learned

- Early and frequent communication within the EIS team: weekly emails and conference calls, WebEx meetings, and in-person review meetings helped maintain flow of data. This ensured that the team had full situational awareness at all times during the project.

- The extended timeline of this project reinforced the necessity of timely scheduling and coordination of both EIS teams and regulatory efforts. Coupled with the continuous communication of the EIS, this process ensured that the numerous process involved in the EIS did not fall behind schedule and that all deadlines were able to be met.
- The extended timeline of this project also reinforced the necessity of strong "hand-off" and "transfer of duty" meetings between project Navy Technical Representative and EIS team project manager. These transfer meetings ensured that new team and project leaders had a clear and thorough understanding of project deliverable, duties, and status.
- The need for flexibility and willingness to incorporate updates and schedule changes despite challenging and changing deadlines. Flexibility by the team ensured that the resulting NEPA document provided coverage for all exercises conducted at SSTC.

SPECIFIC BENEFITS TO THE NAVY, THE PUBLIC, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The completion of the SSTC EIS ensured that the Navy has full and complete NEPA coverage for its activities. The EIS provides environmental planning covering the significant growth of Naval Special Warfare and Naval Expeditionary Combat Command training at SSTC. The team sought, with assiduous detail, an accurate assessment of training needs from operators at SSTC to ensure that the EIS adequately addresses the Navy's training and readiness needs in the region. The EIS Team, led by Mr. Stone, coordinated with COMPACFLT and NMFS to ensure consistency on the Explosive Ordnance Disposal training mitigation measures using time-delay underwater fuses. As a result, mitigation measures established in the SSTC EIS have been implemented Navy-wide. The SSTC EIS also illustrates the Navy's environmental leadership and commitment. It included commitments to nest and fledgling surveys for the California Least Tern and Western Snowy Plover. According to the recent monitoring efforts at SSTC, there have been positive results—the numbers of nests have increased over the last 10 years, even while the Navy continues to train in those areas. For the at-sea activities, the Navy implemented aggressive protective measures to minimize and avoid harm to marine animals. These measures include conducting visual surveys prior to underwater detonations to ensure marine mammals are not within safety zones and avoiding sensitive habitats.

MOST OUTSTANDING ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The SSTC EIS demonstrates the Navy's stewardship on land and at sea with a focus on balancing the protection of species while supporting robust and unencumbered training. The SSTC EIS team's dedication to complete the EIS, the USFWS Biological Assessment/Opinion, MMPA permit process, Coastal Consistency Determination, Essential Fish Habitat consultation, and the NMFS ESA consultation ensured that the Navy can continue to fulfill its Title 10 requirements to train and equip a combat ready force while minimizing environmental impacts to SSTC's sensitive ecosystem.