

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

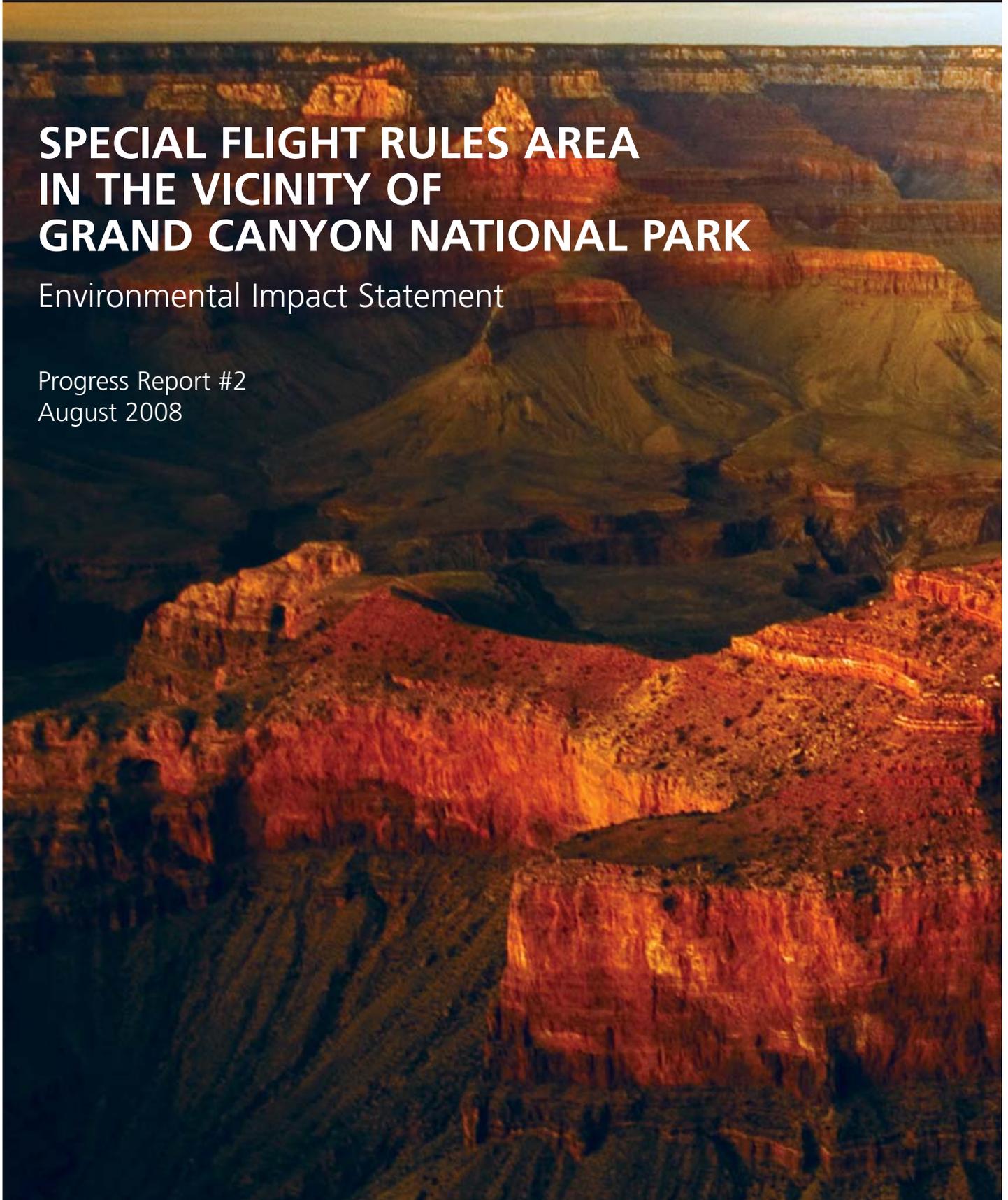
Federal Aviation Administration
U.S. Department of Transportation



SPECIAL FLIGHT RULES AREA IN THE VICINITY OF GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK

Environmental Impact Statement

Progress Report #2
August 2008



SPECIAL FLIGHT RULES AREA IN THE VICINITY OF GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

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To the Grand Canyon Working Group:

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and National Park Service (NPS) have made much progress in the development of an environmental impact statement (EIS) related to the management of air tour overflights at Grand Canyon National Park (GCNP). This progress report will bring you up to date on what has happened since the first report was published in April 2007. We want to keep you abreast of work that has been done and what key steps are to be completed over the next several months.

As a reminder, the EIS is being prepared under the provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the National Parks Overflights Act, which calls for the substantial restoration of the natural quiet and experience of the park. The EIS will address impacts that may result from the alternatives for the proposed management of air tour overflights and other aircraft flying over the park.

Much of the recent effort has been spent on adding a new alternative, Alternative G, to the range of alternatives being analyzed in the EIS. Some aspects of Alternative G are elements on which the Grand Canyon Working Group (GCWG) reached consensus. Other elements of this alternative were added by NPS staff with input from the FAA, GCWG, American Indian tribes, representatives from the air tour and aviation industries, and environmental groups. This new alternative is the NPS preferred alternative. Other tasks the interagency planning team has been working on include:

- Meeting with the Grand Canyon Working Group to listen to and address their concerns and ideas on the EIS (Phoenix, December 2007);
- Developing qualitative and quantitative impact intensity threshold definitions, which are key to NPS's analysis of the magnitude of the impacts of the alternatives;
- Continuing consultations with tribes on a government-to-government basis and to ensure that tribal concerns are considered in the development and analysis of the alternatives in accordance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act;
- Continuing consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in accordance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act;
- Modeling the noise effects of the alternatives, both under current conditions and in the future;
- Clarifying what the definition of substantial restoration of natural quiet in the park means in terms of altitude; and
- Writing and refining the first several chapters of the EIS.

This progress report provides more details on the above items and a brief summary of the alternatives, an update on the status of the EIS and tribal consultations, and an explanation of why the definition of substantial restoration of natural quiet needed to be clarified. The report concludes with a look at next steps in the EIS process, including a timeline of milestones we expect to reach.

As always, we appreciate your continued interest in the Grand Canyon and the development of this EIS. We look forward to scheduling a GCWG meeting on a date to be determined in the fall to review the NPS preferred alternative and some preliminary analyses. If you have questions regarding the EIS, you can find additional information at the joint FAA/NPS website: <<http://overflights.faa.gov>>.

Sincerely,

Lynne Pickard
Deputy Director
FAA Office of Environment and Energy

Steve Martin
Superintendent
Grand Canyon National Park

Progress to Date

1. Brief Summary of the Alternatives

The range of alternatives to be analyzed in the EIS is being expanded to include Alternative G, the NPS preferred alternative. The seven alternatives were developed from options identified through scoping efforts, tribal consultation, and GCWG meetings. In the coming months, the interagency planning team will analyze the environmental effects of each alternative. Details of Alternatives A-F were provided in previous meetings of the GCWG, as well as in Progress Report #1 in 2007. After initial analysis of noise and other impacts, more information about Alternative G will be provided at the next meeting of the GCWG (see Planning Milestones below).

Alternative A (No Action)

Alternative A would continue all aspects of the current airspace and commercial air tour route configuration for general aviation and air tour operations within the Special Flights Rules Area (SFRA). This no-action alternative serves as the baseline against which all of the other alternatives are compared; it is required in all EISs in accordance with the Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 CFR 1502.14).

Alternative B (2000 FSEA Unimplemented East End As Modified For Safety)

Alternative B includes the unimplemented portions of the preferred alternative from the Final Supplemental Environmental Assessment, February 2000 (FSEA) specifically for the east end of the SFRA as modified to address the safety concerns raised after the FSEA was completed. There have been no changes on the east end of the SFRA, other than the expansion of the SFRA boundary on the east, implemented in 2000 as a result of the National Historic Preservation Act, Section 106 consultation. Incentives for quiet technology aircraft would be incorporated as mitigation to further reduce noise impacts if this alternative were selected for implementation.

Alternative C (Consolidated Use)

Alternative C would concentrate air tour routes and remove use allocations. This alternative would expand some flight-free zones and concentrate aircraft overflights closer to developed areas of the park. Alternative C would also include an air tour route east/northeast of the Desert View Flight-Free Zone over Navajo Nation lands.

Alternative D (Modified 1995 NPS Report To Congress)

Alternative D is based primarily on the recommendations provided in Chapter 10 of the NPS *Report to Congress: Report on Effects of Aircraft Overflights on the National Park System* (Report to Congress), with some modifications based on new data. Under this alternative two of the four general aviation corridors through the SFRA would be eliminated; the eastern-most flight free zone would be eliminated; the other three existing flight free zones would be expanded; and commercial air tour routes on the west side of Marble Canyon would be eliminated. The alternative would also include operational changes, such as curfews and quiet technology aircraft incentives.

Alternative E (Alternating Seasonal Use)

Alternative E would maximize the area of the park within the flight-free zones by reducing the number of general aviation corridors and implementing seasonal route closures on the Zuni and Dragon commercial air tour route corridors.

Alternative F (Modified Current)

Alternative F represents the fewest changes from the no-action alternative (Alternative A). Relevant changes include modification of the west-end air tour routes to alleviate noise at Grand Canyon West, as well as modifications to east-end routes. This is the only alternative being considered that includes a provision to change west-end operations.

Alternative G (NPS Preferred Alternative)

Alternative G would maintain and improve upon the current soundscape conditions (as represented in Alternative A) primarily through a combination of elements in Alternatives A-F. Elements of this alternative include reducing noise by establishing special tour routes and lower fees to encourage the use of quiet aircraft technology, and requiring complete conversion to quiet technology within 15 years. Additional concepts include: limiting noise through an allocation system that accounts for all current air tour and related flights over the park while continuing to provide opportunities for the peak number of annual operations previously flown by each operator; reducing noise and other impacts by selectively raising tour altitudes (e.g., in Marble Canyon and Zuni Corridor) and/or moving tour routes away from sensitive resources and visitor use areas (i.e., avoiding the Little Colorado/Colorado River confluence and Nankoweap, incorporating the Dragon Corridor dog-leg, moving Marble Canyon routes to the edge of the SFRA); providing curfews (quiet portions of each day) for the entire east end of the canyon all year; adding access and egress points to air tour routes; and, providing potential growth in flight operations for quiet aircraft technology if the growth does not increase noise or negatively impact substantial restoration of natural quiet. A monitoring system would be put in place over time to automatically provide data on each flight as needed to monitor the effects of the alternative.

2. Status of the Analysis of the Alternatives

NEPA requires that environmental documents discuss the impacts of a proposed federal action, reasonable alternatives to that action, and any adverse environmental effects that cannot be avoided if a proposed action is implemented. The Environmental Consequences chapter of the EIS will analyze the impacts of implementing the seven alternatives on various topics, e.g. soundscape, wildlife, wilderness character, visitor experience, and socioeconomic environment. This analysis is the basis for comparing the beneficial and adverse effects of implementing each alternative.

The U.S. Department of Transportation's John A. Volpe National Transportation Systems Center, Environmental Measurement and Modeling Division (Volpe), has been assisting FAA and NPS with modeling to understand the noise impacts of the alternatives. To date, noise modeling for current conditions under Alternatives A-F has been completed. Noise modeling of future forecast scenarios for Alternatives A-F are underway and projected to be completed this fall. Noise modeling of Alternative G (under current and future conditions) is also expected to be completed this fall.

The socioeconomic impact analysis for Alternatives A-F is nearing completion. The socioeconomic analysis for Alternative G has begun and is projected to be completed this fall.

Ongoing steps being taken to prepare the Environmental Consequences chapter of the EIS include:

- Development of qualitative and quantitative impact intensity threshold definitions, which will be used for NPS's determinations of the magnitude of the impacts of the alternatives;
- Discussions of impact topics still under consideration for full analysis or dismissal; and
- Analyzing the environmental and visitor impacts of the alternatives.

3. Tribal Consultation Update

The FAA and NPS continue to consult on a government-to-government basis with tribes. Tribal consultation meetings were held at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon on January 10 and 11, 2008. Representatives from the Havasupai Tribe, Hopi Tribe, Hualapai Tribe, Kaibab Paiute Tribe, and Navajo Nation participated. Agency staff presented the preliminary alternatives, answered questions, and collected input from the tribes. The tribal representatives were also provided opportunities to fly with agency staff on fixed wing and helicopter routes being considered in the EIS. Additional discussions between the Navajo Nation, FAA and NPS from May through July 2008 have provided input to proposed routes to/from the Navajo Nation for Alternative G.

4. Clarification of the Definition of Substantial Restoration of Natural Quiet

In its Report to Congress, the NPS defined the substantial restoration of natural quiet at GCNP to mean that 50% or more of the park achieves natural quiet (i.e., no aircraft audible) for 75-100% of the day. To address current and modeled aircraft noise impacts, comply with the intent of the Report to Congress, and respond to a 2002 Court of Appeals decision, the NPS determined that the definition needed to be clarified. The clarification was published April 9, 2008, in a *Federal Register* notice to explain how the noise of all aircraft is being addressed, while distinguishing how the substantial restoration of natural quiet will be achieved within and above the Special Flight Rules Area. Following a thirty-day public comment period, the NPS reviewed and considered all comments received on the clarification. A response to comments is in the process of being submitted for publication in the *Federal Register*.

Next Steps

1. Environmental Impact Thresholds

The FAA and NPS are preparing the EIS as joint lead agencies, with both agencies responsible for disclosure of the environmental consequences of the alternatives under consideration. The NPS is working with the FAA to develop the impact intensity thresholds to be used by NPS for each impact topic. Qualitative thresholds, which describe the impacts to the resource in broad terms, have been defined for the NPS impact intensity levels of negligible, minor, moderate, and major. Quantitative thresholds will be used in conjunction with the qualitative thresholds and measured or modeled metrics that are being developed using existing

literature with input from subject matter experts. A technical team was formed in July 2007 to review the scientific evidence in support of the quantitative thresholds. An important part of the technical team review is convening expert panels comprised of agency and academic subject matter experts to examine the scientific basis for the thresholds and identify any data gaps. The panels are currently being scheduled. The FAA will utilize its NEPA guidance on thresholds of significant levels of impact, as further informed by the results of the work of the technical team and expert panels.

2. Planning Milestones

Preparing the Draft EIS	February 2008 – Spring 2009
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modeling results and documentation for alternatives • Peer review of qualitative and quantitative thresholds and intensities • Ongoing Tribal consultation • Initiate Endangered Species Act consultation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) • GCWG meeting on the NPS preferred alternative • Begin FAA safety analysis • Initiate FAA notice of proposed rulemaking • Prepare Draft EIS 	
Review of Draft EIS	Spring – Fall 2009
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FAA and NPS review • Draft EIS finalized based upon reviews • Document printing and publication • 60-day public review • Public meetings • Tribal consultation • FWS consultation 	
Analysis of Comments and Completion of Final EIS	Fall 2009 – Summer 2010
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze and respond to comments • Consider revisions to EIS based upon comments • Finalize Tribal and FWS consultations • Prepare and print Final EIS • Distribute Final EIS for a 30-day no-action period 	
Record of Decision	Summer 2010
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FAA and NPS sign Record of Decision 	
FAA Rulemaking / Implementation	2009-2010
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draft FAA rule published in <i>Federal Register</i> for public review and comment • Final FAA rule published in <i>Federal Register</i> • Begin implementing the decision 	