

Draft Compatibility Determination

Draft Compatibility Determination for Military Training on Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge, Beaufort County, South Carolina

Refuge Use Category

Military Activities and Facilities

Refuge Use Type(s)

Military Training

Refuge Purpose(s) and Establishing and Acquisition Authority(ies)

Pinckney Island:

- “. . . as a wildlife refuge and as a nature and forest preserve for aesthetic and conservation purposes, without disturbing the habitat of the plant and animal populations except as such disturbance may be necessary to preserve the use of the real property for the purposes above mentioned . . .” (Deed of Donation, dated Dec. 4, 1975)
- “. . . for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds.” 16 U.S.C. Â§ 715d (Migratory Bird Conservation Act)

National Wildlife Refuge System Mission

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, otherwise known as Refuge System, is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans (Pub. L. 105-57; 111 Stat. 1252).

Description of Use

Is this an existing use?

No

What is the use?

The use is military training by the United States Marine Corp (USMC) or other branches of the armed services, or state and local emergency services responsible for public safety. Types of training that would occur on Pinckney Island National Wildlife

Refuge (NWR) could include; troop reconnaissance and infiltration, clandestine landing and withdrawal, diving operations, vessel boarding, search and seizure, launch/recovery of watercraft, and UAS operations.

Is the use a priority public use?

No

Where would the use be conducted?

This use could be conducted anywhere within the Pinckney Island NWR, but based on the operational training needs presented by the USMC, most activities would occur on beach habitats or areas where upland and saltwater interface, or intertidal zones, including saltmarsh. Specifically, Corn Island, Big Harry Island, and Little Harry Island, would be predominantly used for the proposed use. These Islands are not open to general public use and are comprised of maritime forest ecotypes and peripheral salt marsh habitats. Total upland acreage of the 3 Islands is 270 acres. Personnel access to these areas would be limited to boat travel only with some UAS activity proposes as part of the training use. The use that would occur on Pinckney Island proper would be limited to vehicle access on the existing trail system, per Refuge guidance.

Key species; saltmarsh and inter-tidal zones include horseshoe crab (*Limulus polyphemus*), American oystercatcher (*Haematopus palliatus*), red knot (*Calidris canutus*), Wilson's plover (*Anarhynchus wilsonia*), diamondback terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin*), loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*), and West Indian manatee (*Trichechus manatus*) and a variety of other federal trust species. Some use could occur in the uplands of the Refuge which is described as maritime forest, mixed forest, pine stands, and open fields. Key species in those habitats include migratory land birds and many other resident and migratory species. Imperiled species such as tricolored bat (*Perimyotis subflavus*) and Eastern diamondback rattlesnake (*Crotalus adamanteus*) also are known to occur in this habitat.

Finally, numerous freshwater impoundments can be found throughout the Refuge. Although unlikely to be used for training purposes, these habitats provide important sites for the establishment and maintenance of wading bird rookeries. Bird species known to regularly nest in these large, colonial masses include white ibis (*Eudocimus albus*), great egret (*Ardea alba*), green heron (*Butorides virescens*), tri-colored heron (*Egretta tricolor*), anhinga (*Anhinga anhinga*), and American alligator (*Alligator mississippiensis*) are well known to patrol along the banks of these freshwater ponds.

When would the use be conducted?

The use could be conducted throughout the year, both during day and night time periods depending on the specific training operational needs. The duration would generally be short, no greater than 24 hours in total for each training exercise. Overall training operational missions have been proposed for 4-8 missions per year,

potentially throughout the entire year, and would be timed to not directly conflict with priority public uses, including hunting and fishing activities. Use may occur during periods of high visitation by the public, but could be spatially and temporally separated to avoid significant impact to Refuge users. Time constraints and limitations may be placed on certain training activities depending on the time of year, anticipated wildlife presence and activity, public visitation conditions, and other factors that could materially detract from Refuge purposes and priority public uses.

This use could begin as soon as all applicable compliance requirements are fulfilled (including issuance of Special Use Permit) and end ten years after the approval date, at which time the use would need to be reevaluated.

How would the use be conducted?

The specifics of each training exercise would be dependent on many factors directed by the needs of the USMC and MCIEAST. The number of personnel involved in each training exercise would be operation dependent, but likely between 4 and 50 military personnel. Equipment used could include UAS devices, boats, amphibious landing vehicles, and various military tactical equipment, communication devices, and simulated weaponry. No USFWS personnel should be needed or required in direct support of the training exercises, during operational deployment. There would need to be some Refuge staff involvement for public notifications, permitting pre-planning, and other administrative tasks. This need can be evaluated on a case-by-case basis as necessary.

A Special Use Permit would be required for each unique and independent training operation and would be conditioned as necessary to protect critical Refuge resources and to avoid conflicts and disruption to the visiting public.

Pinckney Island serves as a critical Atlantic Flyway link and a major rookery for colonial wading birds (like ibises, herons, and egrets). All permitted activities associated with this use would be conditioned to minimize the footprint, adjust seasonal timing of the activity as necessary, and strictly limit any permanent impacts to rookery habitats.

Why is this use being proposed or reevaluated?

This is a new use for the Refuge and is being proposed by the USMC pursuant to the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act (PL 105-57) and Service Compatibility Policy (603 FW2), which require review and reevaluation of non-priority refuge uses every ten years.

The stated purpose of this proposed use by the USMC is as follows:

To support training within the littoral environment by USMC units distributed over a large geographic area, capitalizing on existing USMC ranges and training areas within the region and develop opportunities on other DoD, federal, and state-owned

properties, including access to some National Wildlife Refuges due to their locations near USMC ranges and training area complexes, the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway, offshore, near-shore, inshore, and estuarine waters, and the training opportunities presented by their geography.

Availability of Resources

To comply with the Refuge Recreation Act (Public Law 87-714), the Project Leader must determine whether sufficient resources—financial, staffing, facilities, or other infrastructure—are available to support the proposed use without materially interfering with the refuge purpose(s) or the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. This determination should be informed by a review of current capacity and, where applicable, the refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP).

Assessment of current resources and capacity

Military training use would occur through the use of existing staff. Since the proposed use of military training would be conducted exclusively by the USMC, the reliance on existing refuge personnel should be minimal to, at times, moderate depending on exercise specifics. These activities are likely to be infrequent (4-8 times per year has been proposed), so they do not present a significant long-term commitment of resources. One-time costs of developing plan, NEPA documentation and opening package documentation of \$1000. Total recurring annual expenses would be exclusively dedicated to managing and administering the use would be estimated to be \$2000/year for Refuge Manager time (estimate at current GS-12 rate) and \$1000/year for visitor services staff, and \$500/ year for biological staff time for monitoring and pre-operational consultation. Financial and personnel resources are adequate for refuge participation and would not materially interfere with the Refuge's purpose or mission. However, if the proposed training activity has been determined to exceed levels of impact covered by this determination, additional resources would be committed to further evaluate the proposal. The USMC may be requested to provide NEPA planning support to adequately evaluate each exercise that exceeds currently evaluated impacts to Refuge resources.

Refuge staff would be primarily responsible for permit development, oversight and environmental regulation obligations. Refuge staff would also provide the development and installation/dissemination of signage and notices to inform visitors and in conducting periodic site visits to ensure compliance with established refuge regulations and project stipulations.

Biologists, visitor service specialists, and refuge managers are responsible for completing these tasks which can be done in conjunction with site visits for other purposes, such as wildlife surveys, maintenance, visitor services activities, and other necessary Refuge management operations.

Pinckney NWR receives substantial day-use public visitation and agency resources would need to be reprioritized to properly inform and manage this use to mitigate impacts to the visiting public. These tasks would be infrequent and short in duration.

Impacts of changes to resources and capacity

The availability of resources is subject to change and the level of use provided may vary based on current staffing, partner support, funding, or infrastructure conditions. Costs may increase over time, in relation to changes in the costs for equipment, maintaining facilities, etc. A substantial increase to the number of requests may also create the need for additional resources to administer the use. The Project Leader will use sound professional judgment in evaluating whether the refuge or its partners can develop, operate, and maintain the use in a compatible manner.

For other refuge uses, if resource conditions shift such that the refuge can no longer sustain the use in a compatible manner, the Project Leader may modify or suspend the use pursuant to 50 CFR 25.21. The public would be notified of any changes to refuge uses, including temporary modification or suspension, re-evaluation of compatibility and/or discontinuing of refuge uses.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use

Potential impacts of a proposed use on the refuge's purpose(s) and the Refuge System mission

Permitted activities are designed and/or conditioned to ensure that they do not result in short or long-term impacts that adversely affect the purposes of the refuge or the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. These activities are scheduled, whenever possible, to minimize disturbance and conflicts with wildlife and refuge programs.

The effects and impacts of the proposed use to refuge resources, whether adverse or beneficial, are those that are reasonably foreseeable and have a reasonably close causal relationship to the proposed use. This CD includes the written analyses of the environmental consequences on a resource only when the impacts on that resource could be more than negligible and therefore considered an “affected resource.”

Wildlife species that are expected to only be negligibly impacted by the action include white-tailed deer, gray (*Sciurus carolinensis*) and fox squirrel, and most tree canopy using migratory birds and have been dismissed from further analyses. Habitats that should be only negligibly impacted include forested uplands and freshwater ponds and wetlands. Although not a Refuge purpose, the Deed Restrictions that were included in the deed of donation that established the Refuge include a reference prohibiting such activities that would cause disturbance to wildlife resources, if said disturbance was not necessary for managing the area as a Wildlife Refuge. To remain compliant with deed restrictions, this provision limiting non-management

disturbance would require any such use to be conditioned through special use permit to minimize associated disturbance to wildlife resources.

Short-term impacts

Numerous natural resources would likely experience short-term and temporary impacts through proposed USMC (military) force readiness training activities.

Short-term impacts

Minor short-term impacts may occur. These could include impacts on wildlife, habitats, vegetation, and recreationists. Human presence alone can negatively affect wildlife by causing animals to alter behaviors necessary for survival. The adverse impacts associated with military training activities depend on the species, the time of year, the activities occurring, and the activities' frequency, size, and duration. Species' ability to tolerate humans varies based on multiple factors, such as adaptation to urbanization and body mass (Samia et al. 2015). Expected short-term impacts would most likely affect certain bird species, bats and other mammals, sea turtles, and sensitive wildlife habitat.

Birds, a group of animals frequently impacted by people, exhibit various behavioral and physiological responses to human disturbance and may avoid areas with high levels of human activity (Burger 1981). Physiological responses include the release of stress hormones (Müllner et al. 2004;) and increased heart rate (Weimerskirch et al. 2002). Behavioral responses include increased vigilance (Frid and Dill 2002), altered singing behavior (Gutzwiller et al. 1994), and flushing (Ikuta and Blumstein 2003; Beale and Monaghan 2004a; Livezey et al. 2016; Pease et al. 2005). Human disturbance can also cause birds to discontinue or avoid foraging (Burger and Gochfield 1998; Klein et al., 1995; Martin et al. 2015; Thomas et al. 2003) and instead spend more time displaying avoidance behaviors. Further, McNeil et al. (1992) suggested that some waterfowl and shorebird species may forage at night instead of during the day to avoid humans.

Temporary bird disturbance, such as flushing from feeding or resting, is unavoidable with both motorized and non-motorized military training activities (Peters and Otis 2006, Chatwin et al. 2013, Livezey et al. 2016, McFadden et al. 2017). Flushing can increase energy use, alter habitat use, and reduce fitness. To minimize this, the Service may establish buffers around sensitive areas and enforce mobile equipment speed limits or route restrictions. The Service could also restrict activities during certain time periods in order to avoid disturbance during important migratory periods for migratory birds. Species-specific responses would guide these measures. For example, fast boat approaches led to greater flushing distances in brown pelicans (*Pelecanus occidentalis*), anhingas (*Anhinga anhinga*), and great egrets (*Ardea alba*). Rodgers and Smith (1997) suggested 150-meter buffer zones around colonial bird

rookeries would help minimize disturbance, while a more recent study determined that a 100-meter buffer is appropriate for most species but that some species may require buffers up to 211 meters (McFadden et al. 2017). As such, species assemblages would be considered when developing disturbance minimization strategies.

Like birds, mammals also exhibit avoidance behaviors in response to human activity (Hammitt and Cole 1998). Bats expend more energy when disturbed by humans (Speakman et al. 1991), and mammalian species across the globe are becoming more nocturnal to avoid people (Gaynor et al. 2018). Mammals likely to experience adverse impacts from human disturbance are those with limited available habitat; animals may be forced to remain in the disturbed habitat due to a lack of suitable alternatives, dispersal ability, and underlying landscape, and suffer the consequences of human disturbance. Noise from larger groups of vocal hikers and mountain bikers caused the highest probability of mammals fleeing (6–8 times more likely to flee) in one study; elk were the most sensitive species to recreation noise, and large carnivores were the least sensitive (Zeller et al. 2024). Leblond et al. 2013 found changes in behavior, distribution and abundance of large prey species due to human activities.

Such effects can be particularly detrimental in marine areas, where sea turtles are a focal attraction (Herrera-Silveira et al., 2010; Trave et al., 2017; Wayers et al., 2006). For example, visitors can scare off nesting turtles, obstruct their passage with objects left on the beach, and alter movement patterns of light-sensitive nesting and hatchling turtles with the use of artificial lights such as flashlights (Hallman & Elowson, 1992; Mascovich et al., 2018; Oliver de la Esperanza et al., 2017).

The literature recommends several strategies to reduce the impacts of human disturbance on wildlife. The negative impacts of disturbance become more severe with decreasing distance between humans and animals (Pease et al. 2005; Skagen et al. 2001; Trulio and White 2017). If adverse impacts occur, the Service would create or increase the size of buffers around sensitive species, which can minimize the effects of human disturbance (Ikuta and Blumstein 2003) or preclude use completely depending on specifics of the activity. Impact severity can vary depending on the number of people present, with increasing numbers associated with greater disturbance (Beale and Monaghan 2004b; Burger and Gochfield 1998; Pearce-Higgins et al. 2007; Thomas et al. 2003). Thus, the Service may limit group sizes to protect wildlife again depending on timing, location and operational specifics. Finally, the Service may temporarily or permanently close areas if minimization measures are insufficient to protect wildlife or habitats.

As referenced above, no significant beneficial or adverse short-term impacts are likely to be associated with military training activities at the refuge. The short-term impacts are expected to be minimal and may include littering and disturbances to wildlife, soil, and vegetation. These impacts could occur at launch/landing sites and

during operational movement across the Refuge by equipment or personnel. Military training activities impacts vary by vessel type, speed, direction, and proximity. Non-motorized vehicles are usually less disruptive than motorized activities (Graham and Cooke 2008) due to quieter operation and the typically low density of non-motorized vessels in a particular area. Rapid, loud movement—such as from powerboats — disturbs wildlife more than quiet activities like sailing or canoeing (Dahlgren and Korschgen 1992).

Considering the frequency, size and scale, and duration of military training activities/events, the Service does not expect adverse impacts on the wildlife or their habitats that are more than minor. However, should unexpected adverse impacts be discovered, the Service would implement minimization strategies, which could include modifying, moving, or eliminating the use.

Long-term impacts

As referenced above, no significant beneficial or adverse long-term or cumulative impacts are associated with Pinckney Island NWR; however, military training activities can have minor long-term impacts on habitats, physical resources, and wildlife, although some species can habituate to human disturbance (Samia et al. 2015). In addition, appropriate minimization strategies and continuous monitoring can ensure that military training activities can occur without causing more than minor long-term impacts on the refuge's resources.

Animals experience various long-term effects due to disturbance. For example, male birds that respond to human intrusion by altering their singing behavior can suffer from lower reproductive fitness due to impaired territory defense and mate acquisition (Gutzwiller et al. 1994). Disrupted foraging behavior can cause decreased body mass (Gibson et al. 2018), increasing a bird's susceptibility to disease. Disturbance from visitors can cause an individual or group of shorebirds to alter their normal behavior, change habitat use, and may reduce productivity and survival rates (Mengak and Dayer 2020). These physiological and behavioral responses to human activity cause birds to expend energy that would otherwise be used for survival, migration, and reproduction (Bélanger and Bédard 1990; Weimerskirch et al. 2002). Further, a literature review on the effects of nature-based recreation on birds reported that 28 out of 33 papers observed changes in abundance and reproductive success (Steven et al. 2011).

Long-term disturbance also negatively impacts reptiles, with freshwater turtles at disturbed sites having poorer shell conditions than undisturbed sites (Selman et al. 2013). Due to sea turtles' use of nesting beaches, there is great potential for human activities to generate impacts that disrupt sea turtle activity and generational reproductive shifts (Meletis & Harrison, 2010).

Although long-term impacts could be possible, the Service does not expect the

proposed uses to cause adverse long-term impacts due to the limited frequency (< 1 training operation/month) and duration of military training activities (< 24 hours) at any one location and the small group sizes (typically less than 15). The Service would regularly monitor for adverse impacts and implement minimization measures, such as buffers, group size limitations, and temporal or spatial closures when appropriate. Measures that could be used for reducing impacts to wildlife include limiting group size, restricting certain forms of access deemed excessively impactful, and closing areas during sensitive periods such as nesting, and requiring minimum set back distances to areas such as bird rookeries. (Boyle et al. 1985; Erwin 1989; Haverra et al. 1992; Klein 1993; Miller et al. 2001; Morton et al. 1989; Rodgers et al. 1995; Taylor and Knight 2003).

Impacts to nesting sea turtles (May – September)

The Recovery Plan for the Northwest Atlantic Population of the Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta*) states that military training activities that occur on coastal bases in the southeast U.S. (i.e., Camp Lejeune Marine Corps Base in North Carolina, and Eglin and Tyndall Air Force Bases in Florida) have the potential to increase non-nesting emergences of nesting females, run over nesting females and emerging hatchlings, and destroy nests. Periodic training exercises include such activities as beach landings of air cushioned landing craft, amphibious assault vehicles, and other craft; aerial bombing simulations over the beach; excavation of bunkers on the beach; testing missile defense systems; troops movements on the beach; and mission-related beach driving needs.

Military maneuvers involving explosives and/or low frequency sonar may potentially harm loggerheads in all life stages, but information on the scope and extent of the impacts is not well known. Although sea turtles can hear low frequency sounds, they are generally considered to have an insensitive ear. The minimum sound turtles can hear (hearing threshold) is about 132 to 140 decibels (Ridgway et al. 1969, Bartol et al. 1999). Information on their behavioral response to these decibel levels is limited. Captive loggerhead turtles exposed to brief, audio-frequency vibrations initially showed startle responses of slight head retraction and limb extension (Lenhardt et al. 1983). Sound-induced swimming has been observed for captive loggerheads (O'Hara and Wilcox 1990; Moein et al. 1994a, 1994b; Lenhardt 1994); some loggerheads exposed to low-frequency sound responded by swimming toward the surface at the onset of the sound, presumably to lessen the effects of the transmissions (Lenhardt 1994). Consultation under section 7 of the ESA is the primary avenue for evaluating potential adverse effects of military activities on loggerheads, and for developing alternatives and solutions to minimize these effects. NMFS and USFWS consult with the Department of Defense on military activities, including training exercises near nesting beaches, ship shock testing of submarines in migration and foraging habitats, and bombing training exercises in resting, migration, and foraging habitats. Efforts to minimize the effects of these activities have focused on adjusting timing to minimize encounters with loggerheads and/or adjusting locations of activities to reduce

overlap with sea turtle habitats.

There could be long-term, negligible to minor, adverse impacts on sensitive marine species protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and USFWS ESA from noise. Helicopter noise is generally between 108 and 110 dB (NMFS, 2018). A 2020 study noted that aircraft noise could be detected at 100 feet deep in water, and noise levels greater than 134 dB may trigger behavioral changes in fish, seabirds, and marine mammals (Kuehne et al., 2020). Per NMFS Technical Guidance, weighted temporary acoustic thresholds for mid-frequency marine mammals' range between 170 and 224 dB, and permanent thresholds range between 185 and 230 dB (NMFS, 2018). It is therefore not expected that underwater noise from helicopters or other aircraft such as UAS that would use Refuge would exceed these thresholds.

Permitted users can introduce invasive plants, animals, and pathogens (Anderson et al. 2015; Davies and Sheley 2007; Marion et al. 2006) during military training activities. Once present, invasive species can out-compete native plants and animals, thereby altering habitats (Anderson et al. 2015; Marion et al. 2006). Invasive species can alter animal and plant composition, diversity, and abundance (Davies and Sheley 2007; Eiswerth et al. 2005). If military personnel and/or equipment were found to be introducing or spreading invasive species, the Service would work to minimize this through education, signage, or off refuge washdown and/or decontamination requirements.

Humans can also be vectors for invasive plants. Seeds or other propagules can be transferred from one area to another via clothing or personal belongings and spread to nearby areas through self-propagation (Pickering and Hill 2007). Once established, invasive plants can out-compete native plants, altering habitats and indirectly impacting wildlife. If personnel or equipment associated with military operations were found to be introducing or spreading invasive species, the Service would work to minimize this through activities such as education, signage, and off-refuge washdown and/or decontamination requirements.

Pollution from military training activities—exhaust, fuel spills, and litter—also poses risks. Proper maintenance (e.g., tightening engine bolts, using drip pans, replacing worn hydraulic lines, etc.) can help prevent pollution (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration 2020). In addition, military training activities infrastructure can elevate local pollutant concentrations and affect sediment fauna near structures like marinas and ramps, but these impacts are typically localized and not seen at reference sites (Sim et al. 2015). No additional impacts are expected from the refuge's existing infrastructure.

Boats can spread invasive species due to their range and repeated use in multiple locations (Minchin et al. 2006, Whitfield and Becker 2014). These species may include invasive animals (Johnson et al. 2001, Power et al. 2004), plants (Buchan and Padilla

2000, Mullin et al. 2000), and algae (Chapman 1999, Farrell and Fletcher 2006). boaters often use their boats in multiple locations, facilitating the spread of invasive species between water bodies. Although high-pressure washes are effective, many boaters do not regularly clean their vessels (Rothlisberger et al. 2010), increasing the risk of introduction. Thus, boat operator education is key to prevent the spread of invasive species.

While military training activities can cause long-term effects—such as aquatic vegetation loss, water pollution, invasive species introduction, and impacts on bird populations—these are not expected to occur at the proposed use levels when activities follow applicable laws and policies.

In addition to long-term impacts, cumulative impacts on wildlife and their habitats are possible, mainly if military training activities occur frequently, are long in duration, or if many users engage in military training activities simultaneously. Under such conditions, regular monitoring may be required to determine if the refuge's resources, including but not limited to, water quality, wildlife, and submerged aquatic vegetation, are being negatively impacted by military training activities. Further, use modifications, such as restricting access to specific areas or seasonal closures, could be implemented to protect resources. However, as described in this compatibility determination, cumulative impacts are not expected from the current and anticipated military training activities levels which are anticipated to be conducted at fewer than 1 per month and less than 24 hours in duration.

Flying aircraft over or near wildlife can create stress that may cause significant harm and even death. Intentional disturbance of wildlife during breeding, nesting, rearing of young or other critical life history functions cannot be tolerated and would be in violation of 50 CFR 27.34 and 27.51.

Although research is limited on the impacts of drones or unmanned aircraft known as Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS), the Service has an internal website (<https://sites.google.com/a/fws.gov/region-1-unmanned-aerial-systems-UAS-resource-guide/wildlife-disturbance>) that lists existing research dealing with wildlife disturbance and drones that was considered in this determination, as well.

There would be continued long-term, negligible, adverse impacts from noise on wildlife that may be present in the area. Birds and other wildlife, however, have been documented as becoming habituated to aircraft overflights and other noises after continuous or frequent exposure. This particular area is exposed to boat, vehicle and overhead aircraft noise exposure frequently, and it's expected that some level of habituation has occurred.

Public Review and Comment

The draft compatibility determination will be available for public review and comment for 14 calendar days from (October 20, 2026) to (November 4, 2026). The public will be

made aware of this comment opportunity through notification on Pinckney Island NWR websites, Refuge social media accounts, postings at trailheads/parking lots at Pinckney Island NWR, and at the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge visitor center (694 Beech Hill Lane, Hardeeville, SC 29927). Please let us know if you need the documents in an alternative format. Concerns expressed during the public comment period will be addressed in the final compatibility determination document. Public comments can be submitted in writing to the address listed above or directly to Savannah Coastal Refuges Project Leader at Nathan_Hawkaluk@fws.gov.

Determination

Is the use compatible?

Yes

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility

Each individual training operation request must be evaluated for its specific impacts, and a Special Use Permit allowing the activity can only be issued if there are no significant negative impacts to Refuge resources.

1. Prior to any individual training operation, the USMC (military) will contact the Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex Project Leader and provide specific details about the planned exercise. This notification must be made at least 60 days in advance of the planned training exercise. Operational details shall include the following:
 - a. What training exercise would be conducted on Refuge lands, beaches, and coastal waters, and intertidal zones that are solely under USFWS jurisdiction.
 - b. When is the exercise planned for and how long would it be conducted on the Refuge.
 - c. Would any equipment be needed in support of the training exercise and if so what type and how many.
 - d. How many people in total would be involved in the training exercise on the National Wildlife Refuge.
 - e. Other relevant facts that need to be considered when evaluating the operation.
2. Upon evaluation of the above provided information, the Refuge Project Leader would determine whether the proposed training exercise is likely to significantly impact Refuge resources and Refuge visitors. The Refuge shall either deny the use or negotiate with the USMC (military) to adjust the exercise as to not likely significantly impact the Refuge.

3. General restrictions for each permit include:
 - a. Ground disturbing activities are prohibited.
 - b. Activities would not significantly overlap with visiting public, hunts, refuge events, and would not reasonably foreseeably add impacts to wildlife or degrade habitat.
 - c. Permits would be valid for a specific date, time, location, and duration as determined by the Refuge Manager.
 - d. Areas that are congressionally designated wilderness will be prohibited for entry by the USMC for training purposes.
4. Upon approval by the Refuge Project Leader, a special use permit would be issued to the USMC and is to prescribe administrative or management restrictions required by the Project Leader. Each permit would provide specific details as to the restrictions governing the military activity.
5. The USMC would provide a point of contact to work with Refuge Visitor Services staff to effectively and efficiently communicate to the public regarding the training exercise.
6. Upon request from the Project Leader, the USMC may provide in-kind support to benefit Refuge operations or Refuge natural resources. This may include such things as minor repairs to facilities and equipment that would be necessary to accomplish the goals and objectives of the training mission or could include such operational needs such as invasive species removal if consistent with training operations. This would be done on a case-by-case basis and is non-binding, rather it is voluntary by both parties.
7. The Refuge Project Leader shall be notified no more than 48 hours prior to the initiation of an approved training exercise on Refuge lands.
8. The Refuge Project Leader shall be notified once a training exercise has concluded and receive a written summary of the exercise. A follow up After Action Review (AAR) between the Refuge and USMC is highly recommended depending on the specifics and complexity of the exercise.
9. If Refuge post-exercise monitoring and evaluation detects undesirable impacts to Refuge resources, the USMC would agree to enter into negotiations with the Refuge to provide prudent and reasonable remediation. No additional exercises would be permitted until remediation has been completed.
10. All operations under this use would comply with National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act Section 7, National Historic Preservation Act Section 106 requirements, and other applicable compliance requirements.
11. The Refuge Project Leader retains the authority to halt or suspend training exercises at any time if conditions change that would likely increase the potential for negative impacts to Refuge resources.

12. This Special Use Permit may be cancelled at any time at the discretion of the Project Leader for non-compliance with the conditions of the Permit.
13. Failure to abide by any part of this special use permit; violation of any Refuge-related provision in Titles 43 or 50, Code of Federal Regulations; or violation of any pertinent state regulation (e.g., fish or game violation) would be considered grounds for immediate revocation of this permit and could result in denial of future permit requests for lands administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This provision applies to all persons working under the authority of this permit (e.g., assistants or contractors). Appeals of decisions relative to permits are handled in accordance with 50 Code of Federal Regulations 36.41.
14. The permittee is responsible for ensuring that all employees, party members, contractors, aircraft pilots, and any other persons working for the permittee and conducting activities allowed by this permit are familiar with and adhere to the conditions of this permit.

Justification

In our professional judgement and evaluating the best available science and reasonable predicted impacts of the proposed use, military training activities conducted on the Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge would not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the National Wildlife Refuge System mission or the purposes of the refuge. The stipulations outlined above would help ensure that the use is compatible with the purposes of Pinckney Island NWR. Military training, as outlined in this compatibility determination, would not conflict with the purposes for which the Refuge was established or with the national policy to maintain the biological diversity, integrity, and environmental health of the refuge.

Signature of Determination

Refuge Manager Signature and Date

Signature of Concurrence

Assistant Regional Director Signature and Date

Mandatory Reevaluation Date

2036

Literature Cited/References

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Figure(s)

Figure 1: Trail Map of Pinckney Island National Wildlife Refuge

