

RECORD OF DECISION
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT
F-35A WING BEDDOWN AT TYNDALL AFB

INTRODUCTION

The United States Air Force (USAF) is issuing this Record of Decision (ROD) for the F-35A Wing Beddown at Tyndall Air Force Base (AFB) and MQ-9 Wing Beddown at Tyndall AFB or Vandenberg AFB Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) (*Federal Register* Vol. 85, No. 234, pages 78323–78324, EIS No. 20200244, December 4, 2020). This ROD is for the F-35A Wing Beddown at Tyndall AFB. This decision to beddown a three-squadron F-35A Operational Wing at Tyndall AFB, Florida, considered the information, analyses, and public comments contained in the EIS, along with other relevant matters. The USAF is deferring a decision on the proposed MQ-9 Wing beddown at Tyndall AFB or Vandenberg AFB.

This ROD is prepared in accordance with the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) at Title 40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Section 1505.2 (*Record of decision in cases requiring environmental impact statements*)¹. The USAF is the lead agency and Bay County (and through the County, Bay County cities) is the cooperating agency for this EIS.

Specifically, this ROD documents the following:

- The USAF’s decision;
- The alternatives considered by the USAF in reaching the decision and the alternative considered to be environmentally preferable;
- Relevant factors that were considered in making the decision among the alternatives and how those factors entered into its decision;
- Whether all practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm from the selected alternative have been adopted, and if not, why they were not adopted;
- Practicable mitigation measures, including applicable management actions; and
- A Finding of No Practicable Alternative (FONPA) that there is no practicable alternative to avoid or reduce wetland impacts.

DECISION SYNOPSIS

The USAF will, by this decision, beddown up to 72 F-35A Primary Aerospace Vehicles Authorized (PAA) with 6 Backup Aircraft Inventory (BAI) in a three-squadron F-35A Wing under the Air Combat Command (ACC) at Tyndall AFB, Florida along with associated construction and personnel. For this F-35A Wing beddown, the USAF considered two alternative configurations in the Final EIS (FEIS):

¹Note: This EIS was ongoing prior to the 14 September 2020 effective date of the CEQ’s final rule updating its regulations for implementing the procedural provisions of NEPA. Accordingly, the revised CEQ regulations were not used for this action pursuant to 40 C.F.R. § 1506.13.

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- A three-squadron F-35A Wing consisting of 72 F-35A PAA with 6 F-35A BAI; and
- A four-squadron F-35A Wing consisting of 96 F-35A PAA with 8 F-35A BAI.

The USAF analyzed a range of potential afterburner use for takeoffs:

- Scenario A is afterburner use on 5 percent of total takeoffs;
- Scenario B is afterburner use on 50 percent of total takeoffs; and
- Scenario C is afterburner use on 95 percent of total takeoffs.

The USAF has also chosen Scenario C (95 percent of total takeoffs in afterburner mode as analyzed in the FEIS) to be implemented as part of this decision. Under Scenario C, unless dictated by flight, noise, or environmental restrictions, F-35A pilots will use afterburner on up to 95 percent of total takeoffs to attain altitude at the maximum rate. The increased altitude provides the pilot with more time to safely land the aircraft should an emergency occur. Subsequent to construction, the USAF anticipates delivery of the F-35A aircraft will begin in Fiscal Year 2023.

BACKGROUND

In October 2018, Hurricane Michael damaged or destroyed nearly all Tyndall AFB facilities and required the relocation of several missions from Tyndall AFB. The USAF was already considering restructuring the F-22A fleet to improve fleet health and efficiency. The hurricane provided the impetus and opportunity to carry out that restructuring. Tyndall AFB needs to continue as a fighter aircraft base due to its unique location with regard to premier training airspace. Base reconstruction requires several years to reestablish and modernize facilities and infrastructure to support a fighter aircraft mission. The timing of reconstruction of the base directly corresponds with manufacture and delivery of F-35A operational aircraft.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

As more fully described in the FEIS (*Vol. I, Pages 2-1 through 2-3, §2.2*), the USAF identified two action alternative F-35A Wing squadron configurations for Tyndall AFB:

- (1) Three-Squadron F-35A Wing Alternative: Beddown three F-35A Operational Squadrons, each with 24 PAA and 2 BAI aircraft, which would result in a total of 72 PAA and 6 BAI at Tyndall AFB. Aircraft operations and maintenance would be located in the “fighter campus” area of the flight line district. A mixture of repaired and reconstructed existing facilities and new construction would support the F-35A Wing. F-35A-specific facilities would be required on the flight line. Airfield and airspace operations would occur in existing airspace. The USAF considered the three-squadron F-35A Wing in terms of mission, capacity, environmental planning, reasonable cost, and management factors. The F-35A Wing with three squadrons met or exceeded all factors, which identified Tyndall AFB as an excellent Wing location.
- (2) Four-Squadron F-35A Wing Alternative: The four-squadron wing alternative is an expansion alternative that adds a fourth squadron of 24 PAA and 2 BAI F-35 aircraft to the F-35A Wing, resulting in a total of 96 PAA and 8 BAI aircraft.

The No Action Alternative was evaluated, in which case the F-35A mission would not be bedded down at Tyndall AFB. Tyndall AFB would continue to support transient aircraft and training aircraft using the available airspace, as well as working with the 53rd Weapons Evaluation Group.

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There would be manned and unmanned QF-16 flight operations in support of the 53rd Weapons Evaluation Group. The total number of No Action base personnel and associated employees as of 2023 would be approximately 4,250 as compared with the pre-hurricane number of 5,657 (FEIS, Vol. I, Page 2-16). The No Action Alternative in the EIS provides a benchmark to compare the magnitude of the environmental effects to the alternative beddown actions (FEIS, Vol. I, Page 2-16).

ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

Of the alternatives considered, the environmentally preferred alternative is the No Action Alternative for most environmental resources. Under the No Action Alternative, no F-35A operational aircraft would be based at Tyndall AFB, no F-35A personnel changes or construction would be implemented, and no F-35A flight operations would be conducted. For the socioeconomic environmental resources, No Action is not the environmentally preferred alternative. The No Action Alternative would not result in the restoration of pre-hurricane USAF-related jobs and significant impacts from economic disruption would continue. In the case of socioeconomic resources, the environmentally preferred alternative would be selection of one of the Tyndall-related action alternatives.

BASIS OF DECISION

The three-squadron F-35A Wing was selected for Tyndall AFB based on operational analysis, results of site surveys, and environmental, economic, and technical factors discussed in this ROD; environmental impacts as analyzed in the FEIS; input from the public and government agencies; and military judgment factors. Drivers for selecting the Three-Squadron Alternative were management, maintenance, and operational efficiencies of a three-squadron wing. A four-squadron wing with F-35A fighter aircraft could be considered in the future should expansion be determined to meet USAF mission requirements.

Certain F-35A operational requirements, such as the use of afterburners, are mission- and situation-dependent and include factors such as runway length, temperature, and aircraft loads. The USAF chose Scenario C or afterburner use on up to 95 percent of total takeoffs to allow F-35A pilots to utilize all capabilities of the aircraft. Increased afterburner use expedites formation rejoins after departure; allows formations to meet departure restrictions, and allows pilots to complete tactical tasks sooner in preparation for mission training. As described in the FEIS (*Vol. I Page 2-9, §2.2.4.3*), afterburner use allows the aircraft to gain altitude faster; by being at a higher altitude as it departs the installation, the pilot has more time to safely land the aircraft should an emergency occur.

Additionally, faster acceleration and climb rates result in greater maneuverability in case of emergencies. This increased altitude and airspeed provides F-35A pilots more time to analyze and perform appropriate actions if they encounter aircraft malfunction during departure. Finally, increased use of afterburner would allow the F-35A to take off with more munitions and/or fuel, which provides better operational/training advantages for F-35A pilots taking off from Tyndall AFB.

In addition to these analyses, and as required the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2021, consideration was also given to military family readiness factors, as such and by authority delegated from the Acting Secretary of the Air Force by memorandum dated 19 March

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2021, this ROD documents consideration by the Deputy Assistant Secretary (Installations) of the following information:

- **Housing.** The Department of the Air Force is in the process of rebuilding Tyndall AFB to support the beddown of the F-35A in the wake of damage wrought by Hurricane Michael. As part of this process and as documented in the FEIS (*Vol I, page 4-64, Section 4.1.13.1.1*), the Department considered the extent to which Air Force and private sector resources are available. Analysis and long-term planning continue as to the provision of the adequate mix of such housing to adequately support the expected population.
- **Health Care.** The Department of the Air Force is in the process of rebuilding Tyndall AFB to support the beddown of the F-35A in the wake of damage wrought by Hurricane Michael. As part of this process and as documented in the FEIS (*Vol. I, page 4-65, §4.1.13.1.1*), the Department determined that health care resources will be adequate to support the expected population and is conducting analysis and planning to ensure sufficient medical care from Air Force and private sector resources is available to support the expected population.
- **Interstate Portability of Licensure and Certification Credentials.** Using the Support of Military Families analytic framework, the results of which are publicly available at <https://www.af.mil/> in the Background Information section under the Support to Families tab, the Department of the Air Force determined that Florida statutes are effective in removing barriers to licensure and certification portability. Military spouses can easily transfer professional licenses and certificates from other states and sustain their care

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Public involvement was integral to the development of the Final EIS. Public and agency comments received were considered, including those received during scoping, at the Draft EIS public hearings, and during the public comment period on the Draft EIS.

Information reflecting public involvement associated with an F-35A Wing at Tyndall AFB is in the FEIS (*Vol. I, Pages 1-8 through 1-13*). The FEIS Vol. II, Appendix A provides public involvement documentation as well as a summary of comments received during the Draft EIS public comment period and the responses to those comments. Public notices and meetings included:

- *Notice of Intent:* The USAF published a Notice of Intent to prepare the EIS in the *Federal Register* on November 25, 2019. Notices were also published in local newspapers near Tyndall AFB (for the F-35A and MQ-9 Wing beddowns) and near Vandenberg AFB for the MQ-9 Wing beddown.
- *Scoping Period:* The scoping period began on November 25, 2019, and ended on December 24, 2019. During that period, scoping meetings were held on December 10, 2019, at Gulf Coast State College, Panama City, Florida, and on December 12, 2019, at Allan Hancock College, Lompoc Valley Center, Lompoc, California.
- *Draft EIS Notice of Availability (NOA):* The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency published the NOA of the Draft EIS on June 19, 2020, EIS No. 20200125.

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- *Public Comment and Review Period:* The USAF initiated public review of the Draft EIS on June 19, 2020, with a formal notice published in the *Federal Register* by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The public comment period closed on August 3, 2020. The Draft EIS was available at public libraries and on the project website for review by the public and federal, state, and local agencies. Virtual public hearings were held via webcast on July 14, 2020, for Tyndall AFB, and on July 15, 2020, for Vandenberg AFB.
- *FEIS NOA:* The FEIS NOA was published on December 4, 2020, in the *Federal Register* Vol. 85, No. 234, pages 78323–78324, EIS No. 20200244. Notices were also published in the local newspaper. The FEIS NOA publication initiated the mandatory 30-day waiting period prior to ROD signature.

COORDINATION AND CONSULTATION

As described more completely in the FEIS (*Vol. I, Pages 1-11 through 1-13, §1.4, et al*), the USAF coordinated and consulted with federal and state agencies and federally recognized tribes (tribes) throughout the EIS process.

Government-to-Government Consultation

In accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), Executive Order (EO) 13175, U.S. Department of Defense Instruction 4710.02, and Department of Air Force Instruction 90-2002, the USAF initiated government-to-government consultation with federally recognized tribes that might have an interest in the proposed actions at Tyndall AFB by submitting letters to federally recognized tribes informing them of the USAF's intent to prepare the EIS and inviting them to meet to discuss issues that have the potential to significantly affect protected tribal resources, tribal rights, or Indian lands. The Seminole Tribe of Florida responded that they had no further comments and requested notification if any archaeological, historical, or burial resources are inadvertently discovered. Government-to-government consultations with potentially affected tribes for the F-35A Wing beddown at Tyndall AFB are complete. This consultation is described more completely in the FEIS (*Vol. II, Appendix A*).

Agency Coordination and Consultation

The USAF coordinated and consulted with federal and state agencies responsible for relevant resources (cultural, biological, etc.) early in the environmental planning process.

NHPA Consultation with State Historic Preservation Officers

In compliance with Section 106 of the NHPA, the USAF consulted with the Florida State Historic Preservation Officer and interested parties regarding its determination of effects to historic properties for the F-35A construction and flight operations activities at Tyndall AFB. In a letter dated July 29, 2020, the Florida State Historic Preservation Officer concurred with the USAF determination that the proposed F-35A Wing and MQ-9 Wing beddown undertakings will have no effect to historic properties listed, or eligible for listing, in the National Register of Historic Places.

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Section 7 Consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

In compliance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, the USAF consulted with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) regarding impacts to federally-listed threatened and endangered species. A Biological Assessment was prepared and submitted to the USFWS office in Florida. In a letter dated August 3, 2020, the USFWS Panama City Field Office concurred with the USAF determination of not likely to adversely affect threatened and endangered species at Tyndall AFB.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

As described in the FEIS (*Vol I, Pages 2-41 to 2-48, §2.6*), implementation of the three-squadron F-35A Wing beddown at Tyndall AFB would result in potentially significant transportation impacts and no significant impacts are anticipated to any of the other resource areas evaluated. As analyzed, (*FEIS, Vol. I, §4.1.12 and §5.1.2.12*), additional traffic at the intersection of US-98, Tyndall Drive, and Airey Avenue, particularly during the morning and afternoon peak periods, would cause up to 10 minutes of delay.

While not significant, potential impacts could occur to several resource areas. An example of this is the typical impacts associated with construction and demolition projects. However, these impacts would be limited as compliance with environmental regulations (e.g. permitting) has been or would be followed in all aspects, that is, construction and operation of the action. Up to 130.3 acres of previously disturbed land could be temporarily disturbed due to construction of 26.2 acres of base facilities. Construction of facilities would result in the loss of up to 3.3 acres of wetlands.

The noise impacts that would result from the three-squadron F-35A Wing beddown are described below. As discussed in FEIS (*Vol. II, Page B-28, §B.10.2*), most land use compatibility guidelines are focused on Day-Night Average Sound Level (DNL) greater than 65 decibels (dB). Pursuant to Department of Defense Noise Working Group guidance, the USAF used the DNL metric as the primary predictor of community reaction to noise. Supplemental metrics such as speech interference and L_{eq-8hr} (8-hour equivalent noise level) were also used to describe noise impacts. The USAF identified baseline noise impacts at several representative locations in the communities surrounding Tyndall AFB. These impacts would increase to varying degrees after implementation of the three-squadron F-35A Wing beddown.

With the three-squadron F-35A Wing, the number of off-base acres of land exposed to noise levels greater than 65 dB DNL would increase from 2 acres to as many as 68 acres, and the number of people exposed would increase from 0 to as many as 80 when compared with the No Action Alternative. For context, prior to Hurricane Michael, there were 217 off-base acres of land and an estimated 190 people exposed to noise levels greater than 65 dB DNL.

The F-35A operations would result in noise levels at Tyndall Elementary School exceeding criteria for classrooms, with exterior school-day noise levels as loud as 75 dB L_{eq-8hr} . The number of events per average hour with potential to interfere with speech with windows open would increase by as many as five to six events per average hour and up to four to five events with windows closed. To put this effect in context, noise levels and potential speech-interference events at Tyndall Elementary School would remain the same or decrease compared with pre-hurricane conditions.

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MITIGATION

Mitigation by avoiding, minimizing, or reducing potential impacts has been a priority in guiding the development of the proposed F-35A beddown and associated aircraft operations. Specific measures to avoid, reduce, or minimize impacts have been built or designed into the beddown alternatives; will apply to construction, operation, and maintenance involved in the action; or implemented as compensatory measures.

Other management actions to facilitate implementation of the decision were identified in the FEIS (*Vol. I, Pages 2-53 through 2-61, §2.7*) and will be carried forward and implemented. These are different from mitigation measures because they are required by regulation, or USAF guidance or instructions. Compliance laws and regulations administered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and other regulatory and/or state environmental quality agencies are mandated and some have mitigating effects. These laws and regulations are not considered discretionary with respect to USAF decision making and will be implemented.

To track mitigations the USAF will develop a Mitigation Plan within 90 days of the signature of this ROD that identifies principal and subordinate organizations with responsibility for oversight and execution of these specific actions. In no case will an impact-inducing action be taken or implemented prior to the applicable mitigation measure (defined below) being funded and put in place.

The Mitigation Plan will include, but not be limited to, the following:

- Identification of the specific actions;
- Identification of the responsible organization for each action; and
- Timing for execution of the actions.

Airspace Management and Use

- F-35A pilots will operate in existing Special Use Airspace and maintain close contact with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Air Route Traffic Control Centers, Air Traffic Control, and other FAA entities to minimize conflicts with civil and commercial aviation.

Noise

- As a follow-up to this EIS, once the F-35A Wing beddown is complete and the full operational tempo of the squadrons are in place, the USAF will put in place a new Air Installations Compatible Use Zones (AICUZ) study which will assist, in part, to confirm that the operational noise levels are within the noise impacts identified in this EIS.
- The USAF will continue to work closely with local communities and Bay District Schools, Florida, to minimize noise impacts.

Air Quality

- Construction personnel will minimize idling of all vehicles during construction.
- Truckloads of dirt, sand or gravel will be covered at all times.
- Disturbed areas will be revegetated as soon as possible post construction.
- All equipment will be maintained to manufacturer specifications.

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- Fugitive dust control and soil retention practices will be employed, including:
 - Use of water spray trucks to keep all areas of vehicle movement damp enough to prevent dust from leaving the construction area.
 - Suspension of all soil disturbance activities when visible dust plumes emanate from the site.
 - Minimization of vehicle traffic on non-paved roads.
 - Designation of personnel to monitor the dust control program and to order increased watering, as necessary, to prevent the transport of dust off-site.
- Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED[®]) and sustainable development concepts will be incorporated to minimize air emissions during operations and achieve optimum resource efficiency and energy conservation, except to the extent limited or prohibited by law.
- The USAF will require construction to be consistent with the permitting requirements identified in the Florida State Clearinghouse comments on the Draft EIS (Appendix A).

Safety

- Emergency and mishap response plans will be updated to address the needed procedures and response actions specific to the F-35A airframe.

Soil

- Reinforcement structures will be used for any construction involving excavation to prevent collapse of excavated walls.
- Water will be frequently sprayed on exposed soil during construction to keep soil from becoming airborne (especially with soils susceptible to wind erosion).
- Biodegradable erosion control blankets will be used on steeper slopes (greater than 50%).
- New road construction or re-grading will employ measures including, but not limited to, the following:
 - Stabilization of areas of bare soil to reduce erosion (restore vegetative cover, mulch, and seed if possible)
 - Installation and/or maintenance of road erosion control devices.
 - Avoidance of uncoated steel and concrete being directly exposed to soils due to acidity and potential for corrosion.
 - Installation of sediment controls such as silt fencing, straw wattles, and drain inlet protection.
- Use proper soil stockpiling methods.

Water Resources

- The USAF will implement National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System Construction General Permit requirements. Permit requirements include preparation and implementation of a Storm Water Pollution Prevention Plan and minimum BMPs such as

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those for erosion and sediment controls, materials management, waste management, and non-stormwater management. Revegetation will be required to meet the permit's Notice of Termination conditions.

- Implement Low Impact Development as required per Section 438 of the Energy Independence and Security Act (42 U.S. Code 17094).
- Test groundwater prior to dewatering in or within 500 feet of an identified contaminated site. If groundwater does not meet disposal to surface water criteria without treatment, the USAF will consult with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to determine the proper permit and method to dispose of groundwater.

Biological Resources

- Avoid wetlands during site design and construction as much as is feasible.
- Compensatory mitigation and federal permitting and state water quality certification, in accordance with Sections 401 and 404 of the Clean Water Act, would be necessary for any future construction activities affecting wetlands. Implement mitigation contained in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers/state agency Wetland Permit.
- Incorporate the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission provided recommendations for mitigations to listed species into this decision by reference (*FEIS, Vol. I, Table 2.7-1, Page 2-56*).

Cultural Resources

- In the case of unanticipated or inadvertent cultural resource discoveries, the USAF will comply with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and follow the standard operating procedures outlined in the Integrated Cultural Resources Management Plan.

Land Use and Recreation

- Once the full complement of F-35A aircraft are operating at Tyndall AFB, the USAF will validate operational data and identify projected noise levels based on the most recent noise data.

Infrastructure

- Incorporate LEED[®] and sustainable development concepts into construction projects to achieve optimum resource efficiency, sustainability, and energy conservation, except to the extent limited or prohibited by law.

Hazardous Materials and Waste

- The USAF will use the existing Hazardous Materials Pharmacy for handling hazardous materials and dispose of all such materials in accordance with existing procedures.
- If necessary, the USAF will establish additional satellite accumulation areas for waste and manage in accordance with the installation hazardous waste management plan.

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- Construction on an existing Environmental Restoration Program site will follow USAF regulations.
- As a BMP, prior to construction, workers will be educated on how to identify evidence of contamination, such as petroleum odors or soil staining.

Transportation

- Low-cost traffic engineering improvements will be implemented, such as modified lane configurations (double right turn lane from Tyndall Drive, extended right turn lane to Airey Avenue from U.S. Route 98), improved signal timing and phasing, and off-peak scheduled construction trips.

Although the USAF considered and adopted practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm at Tyndall AFB, there are potential impacts that could occur and cannot be mitigated. Mitigation measures to reduce potential noise impacts were considered (*Vol. 1, Pages 2-61 to 2-62, §2.7.1*), but none would be operationally feasible.

WETLANDS FINDING OF NO PRACTICABLE ALTERNATIVE

Pursuant to Executive Order 11990, *Protection of Wetlands*, there is no practicable alternative to development within or affecting wetland areas from construction of a portion of the F-35A facilities at Tyndall AFB (*FEIS, Vol. II, Page B-24*). The location of the existing weapons storage area and the explosive quantity-safety distance requirements necessitate the expansion of the existing weapons storage area and disturbance of existing wetlands (*FEIS, Vol. I, Page 4-42, §4.1.8.1.1*). Even with all practicable avoidance of wetlands, F-35A facilities construction will impact a calculated 3.3 acres of wetlands, which represent approximately 0.03 percent of total Tyndall AFB wetlands.

As part of the wetlands mitigations, wetlands will be avoided to the extent practicable and wetland impacts will be mitigated through established U.S. Army Corps of Engineers procedures. Prior to any new construction or related activities located in wetlands, the USAF will prepare an analysis and documentation, in accordance with Clean Water Act Sections 401, 404, and 404(b)(1) guidelines, Department of Defense Instruction 4715.03, and provisions of EO 11990. For any construction activities affecting wetlands, compensatory mitigation and federal permitting and state water quality certification will be in accordance with Sections 401 and 404 of the Clean Water Act.

DECISION

After considering the potential environmental consequences of the proposed action and alternatives, comments and concerns of the public and other key stakeholders, as well as other factors related to national defense including current military operational needs and costs, the USAF selects the three-squadron F-35A Wing beddown alternative with afterburner Scenario C at Tyndall AFB. By implementing the mitigation measures identified in the Final EIS and adhering to the mitigation plan described herein, the USAF has adopted all practicable means to avoid or minimize environmental harm.

The USAF will, by this decision, beddown 72 F-35A PAA with 6 BAI in three squadrons at Tyndall AFB and use afterburner on up to 95 percent of total takeoffs. The USAF defers a decision on the proposed MQ-9 Wing Beddown at Tyndall AFB or Vandenberg AFB.

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(Installations)

Date