

Environmental Regulations Limit Training of U.S. Troops

by **Harold Kennedy**

The U.S. military services—among the nation's largest landowners—are struggling to work around a growing array of environmental policy restrictions that officials say are posing severe limitations to their use of training installations, firing ranges and other facilities.

Such factors as urban sprawl, endangered species and regulatory restrictions on live-fire training are beginning to interfere with military readiness, Pentagon officials told the 27th Environmental Symposium and Exhibition, held recently in Austin, Texas. The event was sponsored by the National Defense Industrial Association.

"Range encroachment is a significant challenge in the United States today," said Curtis M. Bowling, assistant deputy undersecretary of defense for force protection. "It cuts across all elements of the Defense Department. The causes are many and complex, and the impact is broad."

The issue is attracting growing attention on Capitol Hill. "Defense Department training ranges here and overseas are under siege," said Rep. Dan Burton, R.-Ind., chairman of the House Committee on Government Reform. The situation is "affecting the ability of our forces to fight, and this administration needs to tackle this problem before it gets out of control."

In all, the Defense Department owns 519 fixed installations, located on 18 million acres of land in more than 140 countries, making the department the federal government's third-largest property owner, after the Interior and Agriculture Departments. Among the Pentagon's holdings are literally thousands of firing ranges, where generations of U.S. troops have learned to use their weapons before going to war. They vary from small facilities for pistol practice—found on nearly every major base—to Nevada's 3 million-acre Nellis Air Force Range, where combat pilots receive advanced training.

The Navy maintains ranges at San Clemente, Calif.; Vieques Island, Puerto Rico, and Farallon De Medinilla, near Guam. They are the only U.S.-owned locations on the east and west coasts and in the Western Pacific Ocean where Navy ships can conduct live-fire training before being deployed, said Rear Adm. Larry C. Baucom, director of environmental protection, safety and occupational health for the Navy Department.

This live-fire training, however, is coming under increasing public attack. After a civilian security guard



was killed by an errant bomb at Vieques, in 1999, protesters occupied the site, and Puerto Rico's governor called for an immediate halt to live fire.

The practice is a danger not only to the 9,300 human residents of Vieques, opponents said, but also to sea turtles, which nest on the island's beaches and are protected by the Endangered Species Act.

Navy officials respond that live fire is not a threat to humans outside of the range, which is located more than eight miles from the nearest town. As for the range's sea turtles, they are being managed carefully, Vice Adm. James F. Amerault, deputy chief of naval operations, told a recent Senate hearing.

"The Navy's practice has been to relocate turtle eggs during amphibious landings and other military exercises," Amerault said. A decade ago, the Navy built a sea-turtle hatchery on Vieques. Since then, more than 17,000 turtles have been hatched and successfully introduced into the environment.

The Navy has been conducting training at Vieques since 1941, and it wants to continue to do so.

"Vieques is a superb training range, the best in the entire Atlantic," according to Pentagon spokesman Rear Adm. Craig Quigley. It is "absolutely essential" to the readiness of U.S. forces preparing to deploy, he said.

To settle the dispute, island voters are scheduled to vote in a referendum on Nov. 6, 2001, to decide whether to end all training and have the Navy leave the island by May 1, 2003. Meanwhile, the Navy is looking for alternative training sites in the Atlantic region, thus far without success. The Navy has agreed to provide \$40 million in economic aid to Vieques and promises another \$50 million if islanders will permit the resumption of live-fire training.

Until the vote is taken, training continues on Vieques, but without live fire. In April of this year, sailors and Marines from the USS Enterprise carrier battle group—on their way to the Arabian Gulf—conducted a short exercise there, using inert bombs and shells. More than 100 demonstrators tried unsuccessfully to block the exercise.

Range Management

During the nation's early history—when it had a vast western frontier—the services had little need for training ranges. Just in the past century or so have they been used, said Army Maj. Gen. Robert T. Van Antwerp, assistant chief of staff for installation management. For most of this period, the ranges were managed with little concern for environmental issues, he said.

"Only over the last 30 years has the United States begun to understand and regulate the potential environmental impacts of a wide variety of civil and industrial practices," Van Antwerp said. During the 1970s, Congress passed a number of laws aimed at protecting the environment, including the Clean Water and Clean Air Acts and the Endangered Species Act.

Over time, Congress and the courts have made it clear that these laws apply to federal agencies—including the armed services—just as they do to everybody else.

The services have implemented programs to comply, and they have had some success. Since 1993, according to a spokesman for the Defense Department's Office for Environmental Security, the department has:

- Reduced hazardous waste by 50 percent, toxic chemical releases by 65 percent and pesticide use by 32 percent.
- Completed cleanup at 60 percent of its active installations and formerly used defense sites.
- Reduced new notices of violations by 77 percent and increased solid-waste recycling by 50 percent.

To reduce the contamination on firing ranges, the services also are switching to lead-free bullets, known as green ammunition. This year, the Army plans to produce 50 million 5.56 mm rounds for the M-16 family of rifles and the Squad Automatic Weapon.

Some of these actions, however, "have come at the expense of training capabilities," said Van Antwerp. As an example, he cited the Army's Fort Hood, in Texas.

Erosion control practices designed to comply with the Clean Water Act prohibit digging on more than two thirds of the base's 185,000 acres of ranges and training land, he explained. "This means," he said, "no digging for vehicle fighting positions, survivability positions, maneuver obstacles or individual fighting positions—all of which are required to meet doctrinal training standards for many units on Fort Hood."

To comply with the Clean Air Act, no smoke, flares, chemical grenades or pyrotechnics are allowed on about 25 percent of the base's training acreage.

From March through August each year, vehicle and dismounted maneuver training is restricted to established trails, and halts in restricted areas are limited to two hours in designated endangered species core areas. Artillery firing, smoke generation and chemical grenades are prohibited within 100 meters of those areas.

Fort Hood's training areas also contain more than 2,400 archeological and culturally significant sites, where digging is prohibited. On more than 1,000 acres, artillery and Multiple Launch Rocket Systems cannot be fired because of noise regulations.

In all, only about 17 percent of Fort Hood's training lands are available for use without restriction, Van Antwerp said.

Cease Fire

Army leaders are "very concerned," he noted, about the recent cessation of all live-fire training at the Massachusetts Military Reserve. Compliance cost the 22,000-acre reserve an estimated \$60 million. If similar restrictions were applied to a major training facility, such as Fort Hood, he said, "the results could be catastrophic, both from a fiscal and a readiness perspective."

In fiscal year 2001, he explained, Army units at Fort Hood were authorized to fire 35.4 million rounds of ammunition at its 33 small-arms ranges, 24 major-weapons facilities and several field-artillery and mortar firing points.

Live-fire training is necessary, "to provide soldiers the opportunities to practice their skills in combat-like conditions," Van Antwerp said. "The fact that the Army's mission increasingly includes peacekeeping

operations does not reduce the need for combat training.

"In fact, 'policing' requires soldiers to be highly proficient with pinpoint target identification and engagement procedures," he explained. "This only can be accomplished by practicing with the actual weapon in specifically designed training exercises on our ranges and training areas designed for that purpose."

Historically, the services chose remote locations for their training lands. But over the past 30 years, Van Antwerp said, suburban developments have surrounded many of these facilities.

As the surrounding human populations have grown, the uninhabited training lands have become havens for wildlife. The 9 million acres of land and water managed by the Air Force, for example, contain 70 federally listed threatened and endangered species, including antelope, bats, mice, reptiles, amphibians and plants, according to Maj. Gen. Walter E. Buchanan III, director of Air Force Operations and Training. "The Barry M. Goldwater Range, in Arizona, is home to the last 100 or so Sonoran Pronghorn Antelope in the United States," he noted. The Defense Department flies about 70,000 sorties there each year, he said. Before every sortie, seven different target areas are surveyed.

"If there are any antelope present, we do not drop or strafe on that target that day," said Buchanan.

The Air Force faces wildlife restrictions even at sea, Buchanan explained. The Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has issued permits to the Air Force's Air Armament Center at Eglin Air Force Base, in Florida, allowing it to use live munitions for a wide variety of ordnance tests training over the Gulf of Mexico.

Under the FWS agreement with the Air Force, FWS employees place electronic tags on gulf sturgeon and track them to ensure that they are not in an area where live ordnance is being detonated.

In previous decades, the communities surrounding most military bases were made up of people whose incomes depended, one way or another, upon the facilities, officials said, and they were supportive of most base activities.

Increasingly, that is no longer the case. As populations around bases have grown, the new residents "are less familiar with sights and sounds of range and training activities," said Van Antwerp. Their impressions are based on "noise, smoke and a lack of access to ... the most pristine natural landscapes in their regions."

In general, U.S. citizens today are less likely to have personal military experience than they were 30 years ago, Van Antwerp said. Thus, he said, they have a lower appreciation of the need for rigorous training.

In Virginia Beach and Chesapeake, Va., property owners filed a class-action lawsuit in April, alleging that 156 Navy F/A C/C Hornets recently transferred to nearby Naval Air Station Oceana have adversely impacted the value of their properties. This, they claim, violates the Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which forbids the taking of private property "for public use, without just compensation." If this suit is successful, a Navy official warns, "it potentially could involve \$500 million in damage payments to the owners of some 20,000 homes."

Public protests are particularly irate concerning the large air-training ranges of the West. "The people of our nation's rural areas—who have chosen to live there because of the qualities of peace, solitude and natural beauty—are increasingly buzzed, boomed and bombed by military aircraft," according to Grace Potorti, a spokesperson for the Nevada-based Rural Alliance for Military Accountability. "How much of the sky does the Pentagon really need?"

Actually, in recent years, the Air Force has used national airspace less often as its force structure has decreased, Buchanan said. However, he conceded, the service is being forced "to modify and consolidate our ranges and special-use airspace" to cope with consolidation of units after base closures, more capable aircraft systems, long-range precision weapons and constantly changing tactics.

The Air Force's number one problem, when it tries to modify or establish new airspace, is noise, Buchanan said. "In some cases, we can accommodate public noise concerns with no loss to the effectiveness of our training," he explained. "When apprised of a noise-sensitive area, we routinely chart it and avoid it, if possible."

When that is not possible, "we try to communicate [to the public] what we are doing, when we are flying and why," Buchanan said. "We have found that altering [the public's] expectations and increasing their knowledge of what is going on can reduce [their] negative reaction to noise."

The services agree that continued access to training ranges is vital to sustaining mission readiness. They recognize that they must "train in harmony with the environment, whenever possible," said Amerault. But Burton added:

"In my view, the issue is not readiness vs. the environment, or readiness vs. development, or readiness vs. commercial aviation. We should not have to choose. The central question before us ... is how these important national interests can be advanced in a balanced, cooperative way."