



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Grand Canyon National Park
PO Box 129
Grand Canyon, AZ 86023

928 638-7779 phone
928 638-7609 fax
www.nps.gov/grca

Grand Canyon News Release

Release date: Immediate

Contact(s): Maureen Oltrogge
Leah McGinnis

Phone number: 928-638-7779
928-638-7903

Date: February 2, 2011

National Park Service releases Draft Environmental Impact Statement that addresses air-tour flights and the substantial restoration of natural quiet in the vicinity of Grand Canyon National Park

Grand Canyon, Ariz. – The National Park Service (NPS) has developed a draft plan to address the impacts of aircraft noise on park resources and visitor experience. Released by the park today, the plan is formally called a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), *Special Flight Rules Area in the Vicinity of Grand Canyon National Park*. The document will be available for public review and comment for 120 days, with public comments due by June 20, 2011.

The Draft EIS was developed to address the mandate of the 1987 National Parks Overflights Act to provide for substantial restoration of the natural quiet and experience of Grand Canyon National Park and for protection of public health and safety from adverse effects associated with aircraft overflights.

In order to restore natural quiet, a definition of what natural quiet is, had to be developed. Substantial restoration of natural quiet in Grand Canyon National Park is defined as being achieved when reduction of noise from aircraft operations at or below 17,999 feet mean sea level (MSL) results in 50% or more of the park achieving natural quiet (i.e., no aircraft audible) for 75% to 100% of the day, each and every day. The NPS considers 50% of the park a minimum restoration goal.

EXPERIENCE YOUR AMERICA

The National Park Service cares for special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage.

“Grand Canyon is known for breathtaking vistas, geologic landscapes, the Colorado River, a rich history, adventurous trails, wildlife, solitude – and natural quiet”, stated Palma Wilson, Acting Park Superintendent. “In the litany of the park’s attributes, natural quiet is perhaps one of the most important. Without its natural soundscape – a canyon wren’s descending trill, wind rustling through the pines, the roar of the Colorado River, and *silence* – Grand Canyon would still be amazing to look at, but it would lack something essential and vital to its remote and wild character.”

Through the Draft EIS the NPS is proposing a plan for managing helicopter and airplane flights over Grand Canyon. These flights currently carry more than 400,000 visitors above the canyon each year. Like all other uses in the park, air-tours play an important role in visitor enjoyment. But without better, more thoughtful management air-tour flights can interfere with the enjoyment of visitors on the ground. Air-tour flights also affect soundscape and other park resources of Grand Canyon’s 1,902 square miles.

Four alternatives are evaluated in the Draft EIS: Alternative A, continued current management (the No Action Alternative), and three action alternatives – including the NPS Preferred Alternative. All alternatives apply to aircraft operating in Grand Canyon’s Special Flight Rules Area, and would continue to exempt operations in support of the Hualapai Tribe from annual allocations and daily caps.

Key provisions of the NPS Preferred Alternative include:

- Increases restoration of natural quiet in the park from 53% to 67%, by reducing aircraft noise in the park.
- Allows for 65,000 air-tour and air-tour related operations annually (8,000 more air-tour flights above what was reported by air tour operators).
- Provides long and short loop air tour routes, with a seasonal shift in short routes at six month intervals.
- Moves most non-air tour operations outside of the park.
- Moves routes away from many sensitive cultural, natural and visitor use areas.

- Sets a daily cap of 364 flights classified as air tours (50 air-tour flights more than what was reported for a peak day in 2005 – the base year for analysis in the draft EIS).
- Increases flight altitudes near North Rim viewpoints.
- Reduces routes in Marble Canyon.
- Requires full conversion to quiet technology, also known as QT aircraft, within 10 years.
- Provides at least one hour of quiet time before sunset and after sunrise every day.
- Makes no changes to the four existing general aviation flight corridors.
- Raises flight free zone ceilings to 17,999 feet.

The NPS Preferred Alternative includes elements that were proposed by one or more members of the Grand Canyon Working Group (Working Group). The Working Group was established under authority of the National Parks Overflights Advisory Group (required by the National Parks Air Tour Management Act of 2000), and consisted of representatives from the NPS, Federal Aviation Administration, air-tour operators, environmental groups, tribes, commercial and general aviation, recreational interests, and other federal agencies. The working group was tasked with assisting the agencies in meeting the statutory mandate contained in the 1987 National Parks Overflights Act.

“Protection of park resources is at the heart of this plan,” stated Palma Wilson. She added, “As stewards of these public lands, it is imperative that we make every effort to preserve and protect all resources, including natural quiet. The National Park Service Preferred Alternative provides for substantial restoration of natural quiet in 67% of the park over a 10 year period. It meets our stated objectives to provide for the protection of public health and safety; protect wilderness values, wildlife, and sensitive species; provide for quality air-tour experiences, as well as primitive recreational opportunities without aircraft intrusions while providing for an economically viable air-tour industry and extraordinary air-tour experiences for visitors.”

The NPS will host five open-house style public meetings to present the Draft EIS, gather input, and answer questions. Meetings will be held in Flagstaff, Phoenix, and Grand Canyon, Arizona; and in Salt Lake City, Utah, and Las Vegas, Nevada. Additional details regarding public meetings will be announced soon.

The Draft EIS can be reviewed online at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/grca> by clicking on the project name, and then scrolling to “Open for Public Comments.” Comments can be submitted online at the same Web address (the preferred method), mailed to Superintendent, Grand Canyon National Park, Attention: Office of Planning and Compliance, P.O. Box 129, Grand Canyon, Arizona 86023, or provided at one of the public meetings. Comments will be accepted through Monday, June 20, 2011.

For information or questions concerning the Draft EIS, call (928) 638-7328 and a staff member from the Office of Planning and Compliance will assist you. Media calls should be directed to Maureen Oltrogge, Public Affairs Officer at 928-638-7779.

-NPS-