Press Release

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Fort Drum officials work with federal, state, local agencies to finalize process for large-scale, off-post training events

Fort Drum, NY - The success of a large off-post training exercise in 2018 has 10th Mountain Division (LI) and Fort Drum officials working with federal, state and private agencies and organizations to develop a comprehensive process for similar training opportunities in the future.

The 10th Mountain Division’s 10th Combat Aviation Brigade (CAB) conducted 10 days of readiness scenarios in April 2018, with Fort Drum as the launch pad that took hundreds of Soldiers across the North Country to Vermont by ground and air.

It presented units preparing for deployment with real-world challenges and simulated threats difficult to replicate within the confines of Fort Drum by expanding the training area with multiple air and ground routes.

This “train as you fight” model is something 10th Mountain Division (LI) and Fort Drum leaders want to emphasize, and work began in 2019 toward that end.

“The 10th Mountain Division is showing us that there is an expressed interest in expanding training missions beyond the boundaries of the installation,” said Cait Schadock, Fort Drum Public Works National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) coordinator. “It gives units new terrain and unfamiliar locations to get from Point A to Point B in a way they can’t do on post.”

She said that there is a procedure for units to conduct smaller training missions off post with division approval and an environmental review.

“The intent now is to refine the existing procedure to support a much larger training exercise with all the required agencies involved and aware of what is happening,” Schadock said. “Because the procedure we have is for smaller training events, like hiking on a trail and not setting up a support area.”

In compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act, Fort Drum published a Programmatic Environmental Assessment in July, followed by a 30-day public review and comment period with related materials provided in hard copy and available online.

“In our process of reviewing the comments, we realized that it would be a really good idea to set up an ad hoc committee to help address these issues,” Schadock said. “The prime goal of the committee was to develop a process for land requests to do large training missions and have a procedure in place that allows the coordination to occur with the right people.”

This includes establishing coordination procedures for locating, establishing, using and, when needed, restoring potential training locations. The sites would be within the local flying area, and the nine counties in consideration – Essex, Hamilton, Herkimer, Jefferson, Lewis, Oneida, Onondaga, Oswego and St. Lawrence – exclude all sovereign Indian Nation lands.

Schadock said that representatives invited to the committee were from federal and state agencies – to include New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and the Adirondack Park Agency – along with stakeholder organizations such as the Adirondack Council, as well as the Indian Partner Nations and Fort Drum officials.

The committee has met remotely three times since November, with roughly 30 people dialing in to each meeting. Among the committee members were senior leaders from the 10th CAB and 10th Mountain Division Sustainment Brigade, who explained why this training matters.

“Training off of Fort Drum is imperative to 10th Mountain Division (LI) Sustainers for realistic mission training,” said Lt. Col. George W. Rollinson, 10th Mountain Division (LI) Sustainment Brigade home station mission commander. “Offsite locations offer Sustainers a new tactical location to think and be challenged in. This becomes harder the longer Soldiers stay here, becoming overly familiar with Fort Drum training areas.”

Capt. James Wade, current operations officer for the 10th Mountain Division Sustainment Brigade, said that an off-post exercise tests many different systems and planning efforts for the units involved.

“For example, a training event a few hours away will require units to essentially conduct a deployment readiness exercise (DRE),” he said. “It will also require convoy clearances and special permits for digging (grey water for cooking in the field) and permits for setting up fuel points. A lot of coordination and planning across the organization has to occur just to get to the designated area.”

Rollinson said that the brigade also has a standing mission to provide defense support to civil authorities when needed in the event of national disasters.

“Training offsite allows our service members to develop skills needed to respond efficiently and safely when humanitarian assistance is required,” he said. “Traversing the regional road networks and potentially providing life support including personnel feeding, water purification, fuel distribution and storage, and temporary billeting to those communities and municipalities who need it most. We are here to support.”

Schadock said that the first meeting helped to clarify some misconceptions raised during the environmental assessment comment period. She said that most noise complaints from the public center on fixed-wing aircraft, which isn’t the kind that 10th CAB aviators fly.

Considering the different land categorizations for training sites, Schadock said particular attention was made to complying with the Adirondack State Land Management Plan.

“We needed to understand what areas the state is protecting that we would have to avoid,” she said.

The committee also discussed the type of training missions that would be allowed, the duration of a training exercise and how often they would be conducted.

“As with any environmental proposal, we provided alternatives,” she said. “One would have allotted for six training events a year. Another alternative would allow up to two training events and then the third alternative provides for no action taken, which means that the units continue to do what they are already doing. This is always an alternative that is addressed in environmental documents.”

The first two alternatives would allow for training exercises lasting up to 14 days with a follow-on week to return property to pre-training conditions. The number of personnel and types of vehicles and aircraft used would be dependent on the mission, but no live-fire ammunition, explosives or drone operations would be included.

Potential environmental impacts for each alternative were discussed and analyzed for land use, noise, air space, geology and soils, water resources, transportation and public health, to name a few.

Schadock said that having these discussions now, and having input from multiple agencies in the planning process, would avoid complications or confusion in the future.

“The formation of the ad hoc committee really helped us find out what everyone wanted to see happen, and it gave them a better understanding about the training activities we wanted to do,” she said.

With the committee having established a way forward regarding a procedure for a large-scale training event, the next step is formally documenting it with all the committee input.

Schadock said that their recommendation to the 10th Mountain Division (LI) and Fort Drum leadership is to select Alternative 2 and limit the number of large-scale, off-post sustainment training events to no more than two annually. If two training events occur in the same year, they would not be conducted at the same site. Another recommendation is to avoid selection of sites on Adirondack Forest Preserve Land (to include wildness, wild forest and canoe areas).

“Going forward, we are going to make changes to the programmatic environmental assessment, and recommend Alternative 2 to the decision-makers, which is the 10th CAB commander, the 10th Sustainment Brigade commander and garrison commander,” Schadock said. “The Adirondack organizations were under the impression that when we pick a site that we would use it over and over again. So, that is another item to address for the final document.”

The final document, called a FONSI, or Finding of No Significant Impact, states the reasons why a proposed action will have no significant effect on the environment, and it will be attached to the environmental assessment.

“We feel that, right now, we can get to a FONSI with the current processes we’re putting in place,” Schadock said.

Rollinson said that there is currently no timeline established as to when the first off-post exercise will occur until everything is finalized.

“As of now, we haven’t determined any date for an off-post training exercise, but we are pleased with the efforts and support from all the agencies and organizations involved that are making this possible,” he said.

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