

## FACT SHEET

AFVR-DE-PSE/Env Res Br  
Mr. Gossweiler/862-0188  
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1. SUBJECT: Current status of Eagle River Flats issue.
2. BACKGROUND:

a. Eagle River Flats, a 2,500-acre wetland, is Fort Richardson's only impact area for heavy artillery fire. It is also an important staging area for waterfowl during spring and fall migrations. In the early 1980s, Army biologists discovered an unusually high rate of waterfowl mortality occurring on the Flats. Several loosely conducted field studies conducted by the Army and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) resulted in the collection of bird carcasses which were sent to the the USFWS-labs for analysis. This early analysis failed to pinpoint the problem because specimens were not in good condition. The Army Environmental Health Agency did some testing of water and sediments in Eagle River in 1985 which showed no unusual chemistry. In 1988, field investigations resumed, but this time in a more organized and structured fashion with the creation of a multi-agency investigative task force. Ground searches conducted by the task force this year have turned up over 300 waterfowl carcasses (most were very fresh) and about 500 feather piles in a study area comprising about 8% of the entire flats. Biologists consider this to be a severely high mortality rate. Bird carcasses are being stored in USFWS freezers while arrangements are being made in CONUS for lab analysis. Information regarding detailed chemical composition of ordnances fired into the Eagle River Flats has been verbally requested by the task force and is presently being sought. All in all, task force members are satisfied with the way things are progressing. Unfortunately, that has not been reflected by recent newspaper articles. In conversations over the past few days with the task force project coordinator and USFWS biologists, it appears that most of the controversy in the media is being "stirred up" by a few individuals with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. This organization, although a member of the task force, has not had a good "track record." They have only been present at a few task force meetings and have minimally participated in ground searches. Unfortunately, one of the few times they were involved in these searches was during a visit to the Flats by the media. Many of the statements made by Fish and Game employees in the most recent article published in the Anchorage Times (enclosure 1) are totally unfounded. The USFWS is in full agreement with the Army that many of the statements made in that article were "out of line" and untrue. The next task force meeting (13 October 1988) will focus on clearing the air and restoring credibility.

b. As stated above, the Eagle River Flats is an important staging or gathering area for a variety of waterfowl during spring and fall migration. Among the most conspicuous and publicly important of these is the North American trumpeter swan (see enclosure 2). This species, largest of all waterfowl, has only within the last 20 years been removed from the endangered species list. It is federally protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and listed as a species of special concern. Under strict protection, the trumpeter swan has

made a strong comeback in Alaska (population estimates in 1985 was about 10,000) although its numbers in the continental U.S. remain low (about 500). A significant number of these birds nest on Fort Wainwright lands and the Army has been conducting surveys of the swans in cooperation with the USFWS for about ten years (enclosure 3). Although there is no evidence that trumpeter swans ever nested on the Eagle River Flats, it has been observed over the last eight years that the area is used as an important staging ground for as many as 1,200 swans between late September and mid-October, with highest concentration found from 5-25 October. In light of this circumstance, the Army Garrison Commander has determined that all training exercises involving the firing of ordinances into Eagle River Flats will be suspended annually between 5 and 25 October, to prevent the death or injury of swans during their pre-migrational gathering.

3. FACTS BEARING ON THE SUBJECT:

a. In accordance with AR 420-74, Natural Resources, Land, Forest, and Wildlife Management, paragraph 2-5, Mission requirements for the land: "The installation commander will plan land utilization with an awareness of the potential environmental effects of proposed actions. Whenever possible, mission requirements for the land will avoid or minimize adverse effects and restore or enhance environmental quality."

b. In accordance with subparagraph 6-1a of above quoted regulation: "Special consideration will be given to soil and vegetation characteristics, surface and subsurface water, unique archaeological and geological sites, and wildlife in the development, design, construction, and maintenance of an installation and the performance of its mission. All possible efforts will be made to protect the land and water resources so that none will be lost, degraded or destroyed. Measures will be taken to control sources of pollutants harmful to the land and its resources.

c. In accordance with AR 200-2, Environmental Effects of Army Actions, subparagraph 1-5j: "All Army commands and agencies will--(1) Establish, as necessary, internal procedures for analyzing environmental consequences of continuing and proposed actions and programs which would implement their mission and/or function and for preparing and coordinating within their technical staffs, and processing environmental documentation required for proposed actions and programs."

d. In accordance with the 6th Infantry Division (Light) Cooperative Agreement for Management of Fish and Wildlife Resources on Army Land in Alaska:

THE 6TH INFANTRY DIVISION (LIGHT) AGREES:

1. To conduct activities or operations consistent with the military mission, in such a manner that they will not adversely affect those characteristics of unique or sensitive habitats which result in their use by wildlife.
2. Not to conduct activities or operations in or near unique or sensitive habitats during time periods or seasons which are likely to have significant adverse effects on the wildlife species for which the

area is created. When an activity or operation is planned which will likely have a significant adverse impact prior consultation with ADF&G is required.

3. During the time periods indicated above, to also notify ADF&G in those instances where the Army concludes that the presence of animals in or near sensitive habitats is too low for there to be significant effects from activities or operations yet where if such populations are present, significant effects could be expected.

4. To provide the same considerations and protective measures to all other unique or sensitive habitats nominated by the ADF&G pursuant to this agreement and mutually agreed to by the signatories.

e. A serious waterfowl mortality problem discovered in 1982 still exists on Eagle River Flats;

f. To date, studies of the waterfowl problem have eliminated infectious diseases, botulism, lead poisoning and bodily injuries as possible causes.

g. Toxic substances entering the wetland as a result of either past or present military activities is highly suspected as the cause for bird deaths.

h. General concensus among the majority task force members is that the investigation is proceeding along satisfactorily.

i. The Army and, to a lesser extent, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has received unfavorable publicity on the waterfowl mortality issue mainly from a few vocal individuals.

j. Trumpeter swans, a highly visible species of significant public concern mass in large numbers (1,000-1,200) in the Eagle River Flats usually from 5 October to 25 October before migrating south to British Columbia.

k. The majority of these swans are most likely from the Susitna Flats population which presently numbers 1,500. This means that during certain years the Eagle River Flats may serve as a staging area from more than three-fourths of that entire population.

l. At night and during inclement weather the swans are less likely to fly and are, therefore, more susceptible to artillery fire.

m. The Environmental Resources Office has received telephone calls and inquiries from other agencies and individuals regarding firing activities during swan massing.

#### 4. ACTION TAKEN.

a. In cooperation with other Federal and state agencies established an investigative task force in an attempt to solve the Eagle River Flats waterfowl mortality problem.

b. Arranged access to the Eagle River Flats for ground searches and aerial surveys.

c. Participated in almost all ground searches.

5. ACTION REQUIRED.

a. Provide task force with information regarding chemical composition of munitions being fired into Eagle River Flats.

b. Provide funding (or a portion thereof) for chemical analysis of birds, water, vegetation and soil.

c. Add change to 6th Infantry Division (Light) Regulation 350-2, 6th Infantry Division (Light) Range Regulations, to suspend firing activities in Eagle River Flats during critical staging period of the North American trumpeter swan between 5 and 25 October.

4. REFERENCES:

a. AR 420-74, 25 February 1986, Natural Resources--Land, Forest, and Wildlife Management.

b. AR 200-2, 1 September 1981, Environmental Effects of Army Actions.

c. Cooperative Agreement for Management of Fish and Wildlife Resources on Army Lands in Alaska, July 1986.

3 Encls

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