

Comment period open for Taos airport environmental statement

By Matthew van Buren

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Members of the public have until July 30 to comment on a Final Environmental Impact Statement issued by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regarding a new runway and related facilities at Taos Regional Airport.

According to information published in the Federal Register, the Final Environmental Impact Statement resulted from consultations among the FAA, Taos Pueblo, the town of Taos, the National Park Service, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the New Mexico State Historic Preservation Officer and the New Mexico Department of Transportation. The FAA examined the proposed action and several alternatives for environmental, cultural and other potential impacts.

The proposed plan for the airport includes a new 8,600-foot-long, 100-foot-wide runway, which proponents say is necessary for safety and efficiency; shortening the existing runway by 420 feet; constructing a new 3,200-foot-long airport access road and extending an on-airport access road by about 2,800 feet; and grading and drainage improvements, taxiways, lighting, and communication and navigation equipment associated with the new runway.

“The longer runway will allow all aircraft, particularly the larger turboprops and jets, to operate more efficiently,” the statement reads. “More efficient operations would occur because the proposed runway would allow aircraft to carry greater payloads during the high-altitude, high-temperature, low-air-density conditions that typically occur at (Taos Regional Airport) during certain times of the year.”

The FAA has determined that the proposed work is needed because the existing runway “does not provide adequate annual wind coverage” for the majority of aircraft that currently use or are projected to use the airport, and it is not sufficiently long for some aircraft.

The Final Environmental Impact Statement projects that, if the proposed project is built, an additional 2,665 operations will occur annually in the short term, increasing to about 4,880 additional operations in less than a decade. It examines possible noise, socioeconomic, air quality, water resource, historic, wildlife and other impacts of the proposed project and several alternatives, generally finding that substantial impacts would not occur.

The FAA lists “Alternative 2D,” slightly different from the town’s proposed “Alternative 2C,” as its preferred alternative. Alternative 2D would provide the 8,600-foot runway, but it would be shifted 798 feet to the southeast to minimize impacts to the 100-year floodplain, though it would still result in impacts to about 2.7 acres. According to the Final Environmental Impact Statement, Alternative 2D would result in 2.26 fewer acres of floodplain impacts. It would cost about the same — close to \$9 million — as Alternative 2C and would not require additional land acquisition.

According to a recent release from U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman's, D-NM, office, four New Mexico airports have been named as recipients of FAA grants. The Taos Regional Airport will receive \$94,846 to fund the final phase of the Environmental Impact Statement, according to the announcement.

The Final Environmental Impact Statement can be reviewed in full at the Taos Regional Airport, Taos Town Hall and the Taos Public Library.

If, after reviewing comments received by July 30, the FAA approves the plan unconditionally, the FAA would issue a Record of Decision depicting and approving the project. According to information in the FEIS, the Record of Decision reflecting approval is a necessary prerequisite to federal funding being made available for the project.

Comments to the FAA must include the full names and addresses of commenters. The FAA calls for them to "be as specific as possible" and "address the analysis of potential environmental impacts, the adequacy of the proposed action, or the merits of alternatives and the mitigation being considered."

Comments regarding the Final Environmental Impact Statement are to be submitted to Dean McMath, ASW-613, Regional Environmental Programs Manager, Federal Aviation Administration, Southwest Regional Office, Fort Worth, Texas, 76193.

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