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FAA Approves Expanded Military Training On CNMI's Farallon De Medinilla

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New, larger restricted airspace to take effect in June

By Mar-Vic Cagurangan - For Variety

HAGÁTÑA, Guam (Marianas Variety, March 14, 2017) – The Federal Aviation Authority has approved the Department of the Navy’s plan to expand the military training range on Farallon de Medinilla to accommodate the use of advanced weapons systems on the island located 45 nautical miles north of Saipan.

“This action expands the restricted airspace at Farallon De Medinilla Island by designating a new area, R-7201A, that surrounds the existing R-7201. R-7201A encompasses that airspace between a 3 nautical mile radius and a 12-NM radius of lat. 16°01’04” N., long. 146°03’31” E,” the FAA said in a document posted Monday on the Federal Register.

The FAA said the configuration allows for the activation of either R-7201 or R-7201A alone, or to activate them both simultaneously.

The new restricted airspace, which takes effect on June 22, “provides the required airspace to

conduct military training scenarios using air-to-ground ordnance delivery, naval gunfire, lasers and special operations training,” FAA said. “This change will accommodate Department of the Navy training involving the use of advanced weapons systems which the current R-7201A airspace does not sufficiently and safely provide”

The FAA said the flexibility enables more efficient use of airspace by allowing the Navy to activate only that amount of restricted airspace required for the particular mission to be conducted.

Farallon de Medinilla, a 1.7-mile-long uninhabited island, is being leased by the U.S. Navy from the CNMI. For years, the Navy has been using the island for military and bombing exercises, which have been the subject of protest by environmentalists.

In 2002, the Center for Biological Diversity sued the Navy for the destruction of wildlife habitat that led to the killing of several avian species on Farallon de Medinilla.

Prior to the lawsuit, the Navy admitted that live-fire exercises using bombs, air-to-ground missiles, and other munitions had killed migratory birds.

A subsequent court decision by District Judge Emmet G. Sullivan in the District of Columbia, ordered the U.S. Department of Defense to halt bombing exercises on the island until it complies with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act or MBTA.

FDM is home to more than a dozen species of migratory birds protected by the MBTA, including the frigatebird, masked booby, brown booby, red-footed booby, sooty tern, brown noddy, black noddy, fairy tern, cattle egret, red-tailed tropicbird, white-tailed tropicbird, Pacific golden plover, whimbrel, bristle-thighed curlew, and the ruddy turnstone.

Citing its environmental review, the FAA has determined that the training range expansion “does not present the potential for significant impacts to the human environment.”

The FAA said it conducted an independent written re-evaluation and adoption of the Navy’s Final Environmental Assessment Overseas Environmental Assessment for the Establishment of Mariana Islands Range Complex airspace to support the Navy’s MIRC airspace requirements.

The public notice for the expansion of the lateral boundaries of the restricted area was first posted on the Federal Register on Aug, 25, 2015.

“Interested parties were invited to participate in this rulemaking effort by submitting written comments on the proposal. No comments were received,” the FAA said.

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