

The National Guard wants to clear 170 acres of woods on Cape Cod for a new machine gun range

By [David Abel](#) Globe Staff, Updated April 13, 2021, 2 hours ago



National Guard Specialist Kyle Canzano (right) prepared to take the Army's rifle record fire qualification range, a test that is an annual requirement for Guard members, on the existing firing range for machine guns at Camp Edwards. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

JOINT BASE CAPE COD — In a clearing in the woods of these sprawling training grounds, First Lieutenant Patrick Foley peered down the barrel of his M4 assault rifle and awaited the command, “weapons free.”

Then the medevac pilot fired 40 rounds at a series of people-shaped targets that popped up from mounds

of dirt in the distance, striking all but eight of them.

“Not bad for a pilot,” said Foley, who was visiting with his Westfield-based company from the Massachusetts National Guard’s 126th Aviation Battalion.

It was the first time he fired his weapon in a year, and the practice wasn’t just sorely needed but a requirement to maintain his readiness to deploy to a conflict zone.

Soon, guard members could have much more room to practice firing their service weapons, as well as heavier, vehicle-mounted machine guns and grenade launchers.

A controversial 170-acre machine gun range has been proposed on Joint Base Cape Cod. The gun range would expand an existing range.

Blue: Existing gun range, Red: Proposed 170-acre machine gun range



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Source: Mass. Army National Guard

 A Flourish map

Military officials have proposed clearing 170 acres of dense forest to build a new range on the 15,000-acre base on the Upper Cape, one of only a few in the state where soldiers can drill with their weapons. But the controversial proposal — likely to receive a key approval in the coming days — has been vehemently opposed by local lawmakers and environmental groups.

The Guard has promised to protect the land. But in a time of growing concerns about climate change,

critics have raised alarms about the impact of felling so many trees, as well as the potential for polluting the region's water supply.



A view of the proposed site for a new machine gun range at Camp Edwards. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

They cited an estimate by the Woodwell Climate Research Center in Woods Hole that the clearcutting of thousands of pitch pine and scrub oak trees would lead to the release of about 17,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide and eliminate the capacity to remove some 300 additional metric tons a year. Trucking in thousands of soldiers, including those from other states, would add to the emissions, and traffic on the Cape, they warn.

Opponents also worry about munitions and ordnance contaminating a fragile aquifer, which is the primary source of drinking water for hundreds of thousands of residents from the surrounding towns, including Bourne, Falmouth, Mashpee, and Sandwich.

“This is the wrong project in the wrong place for the wrong reasons, and the Guard seems hellbent on cramming it down our throats,” said Andrew Gottlieb, executive director of the Association to Preserve Cape Cod. “We will fight this project to assure that the Cape’s water supply is protected from

contamination by the military, just as the region had to fight them to clean up their poison in the 80s.”

He and others said they had little confidence in assurances from the Guard, which has promised to protect the water and mitigate the climate impacts of the proposed machine gun range.

They cited a century-long history of the military’s environmental degradation of the land from detonated munitions, unexploded and decaying ordnance, and everything from flares to firefighting foams that use highly toxic chemicals. Groundwater that flows to 500,000 people in the area also has been contaminated by the dumping of toxic waste and jet fuels, as well as inadequate wastewater treatment.



Targets are seen on the existing firing range for machine guns at Camp Edwards. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

It got so bad that federal regulators designated two portions of the base [Superfund sites](#). Acting to prevent “imminent and substantial endangerment to public health,” the Environmental Protection Agency in 2000 ordered the National Guard to start removing unexploded ordnance and clean up contaminated groundwater and soils — the first such order in its history for a military base.

“Resistance from the military was intense and broke down only with local advocates’ pressure, and the EPA stepping up and being aggressive,” Gottlieb said.

To avoid similar confrontation over the proposed new range, which would cost an estimated \$11.5 million, Guard officials said they've spent years taking steps to ensure there won't be additional pollution or adverse impacts.

They vowed to comply with all federal and state environmental requirements before building the range, which would vastly expand an already cleared area on the base, one that looks like a grass runway in the forest. All munitions used on the range would be “environmentally friendly,” using copper-coated ammunition rather than lead, they added.

In defense of the project — which they insist is critical to maintaining the readiness of their soldiers — Guard officials say they have “extensively coordinated” with agencies including the state Department of Environmental Protection and the Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, and “fully engaged” with state and federal environmental reviews.



National Guard members walked onto the existing firing range for machine guns at Camp Edwards as they prepared to take the Army's rifle record fire qualification range. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

They noted the Guard now has a dedicated environmental affairs program, which they said ensures the

training grounds are sustainable and don't harm rare species or "other sensitive resources." Moreover, they said, a greenhouse gas analysis of the project they commissioned found that their forestry management plans and other preservation efforts — including transferring 260 acres of land on the base to the adjacent Crane Wildlife Management area — would offset the carbon emissions of all the lost trees.

As a result of their efforts, the officials said, the National Guard Bureau, a federal agency overseeing all state militias, plans in the coming days to declare a "finding of no significant impact."

Once the Guard gives its final approval, and the range is certified under the National Environmental Policy Act, the Massachusetts Environmental Management Commission will vote on whether to approve the plan.

"There is no question that misinformation can stir emotion in the community," said Brigadier General Christopher M. Faux, executive director of Joint Base Cape Cod.

Faux said he hopes the range's opponents would give more consideration to the needs of his Massachusetts citizen soldiers, many of whom must now travel to bases in Vermont and New York to obtain their required training. That distance is an added burden on them, given that they work full-time jobs and are required to drill one weekend a month.

"It's imperative that we make these training venues available," he said. "This is the kind of stuff that brings our soldiers home alive."

He insisted opponents of the range are only a "vocal minority."

"The vast majority of citizens don't have a problem with this," he said.

He urged critics to look at all the other land on the base that has been protected from development. "Let's not focus on 170 acres; let's focus on the 15,000 acres of our property, which we manage into perpetuity," Faux said.

But some lawmakers said they still have grave concerns about the range.

In a letter to the Guard last fall, state Representative Dylan Fernandes, who represents Cape Cod, said there were "glaring gaps" in the Guard's environmental assessment, and he worries the range could have "devastating environmental consequences."

"Climate change is the greatest threat facing our planet, and the Cape and Islands are particularly

vulnerable to its effects,” Fernandes said. “We cannot afford to lose 170 acres of forest on the Cape. Now is the time to take action to prevent climate change, not exacerbate the problem.”

Members of the state’s Congressional delegation echoed those concerns, urging the Pentagon to do a broader environmental review.

“I stand with the Cape residents who are concerned about the potential environmental impacts that this new project could have on some of our state’s most precious lands,” Senator Edward J. Markey said in a statement. “I’ll be working with my colleagues in the delegation to urge that a full environmental impact study of the proposed site is conducted, before one shovel of dirt is overturned.”

In a letter Markey, Senator Elizabeth Warren, and Representative William Keating sent to the Guard this week, in which they noted the state has listed 41 species on the base that are endangered, threatened, or of special concern, they said the military has an “obligation” to do more than what’s required of them by law.

“The overwhelming majority of constituents who have contacted our offices believe that further review of the project should be required beyond the standard study,” they wrote.

On a recent afternoon at the base’s Sierra Range, where soldiers are limited to firing on targets less than 1,000 feet away, Specialist Kyle Canzano did his best to hit the red and blue marks.

It had been nearly two years since the radar technician fired his M4, and he missed nearly half the targets.

“This training is vital to protect myself, and my fellow soldiers,” he said. “It’s really important to have a range like this.”

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