

**US Department of Transportation  
Federal Aviation Administration**



**US Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**



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## **Hawai'i Volcanoes National Park**

### **Air Tour Management Plan**

*Summary of Comments Received During Scoping  
for the Environmental Assessment*

**November 2022**

# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
COMMENT ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY .....	1
COMMENT ANALYSIS .....	2
SUMMARY OF COMMENTS .....	2
ADV100 Adverse Impacts: Soundscape Impacts.....	2
ADV200 Adverse Impacts: Wildlife/Biological Impacts.....	3
ADV300 Adverse Impacts: Endangered Species Impacts.....	3
ADV400 Adverse Impacts: Wilderness Character Impacts.....	3
ADV500 Adverse Impacts: Cultural Resource Impacts .....	3
ADV600 Adverse Impacts: Visual Impacts.....	3
ADV700 Adverse Impacts: Equity.....	3
ADV800 Adverse Impacts: Climate Change, Greenhouse Gasses, and Air Quality.....	4
ADV900 Adverse Impacts: Other.....	4
ALT100 Alternatives: Substantive Support for Alternative 1 – No Action.....	4
ALT150 Alternatives: Substantive Opposition for Alternative 1 – No Action .....	4
ALT200 Alternatives: Substantive Support for Alternative 2 – No Air Tours in Planning Area.....	4
ALT250 Alternatives: Substantive Opposition for Alternative 2 – No Air Tours in Planning Area.....	4
ALT300 Alternatives: Substantive Support for Alternative 3 – Mitigation Measures .....	5
ALT350 Alternatives: Substantive Opposition for Alternative 3 – Mitigation Measures .....	5
ALT400 Alternatives: Substantive Support for Alternative 4 – East Rift Zone .....	5
ALT450 Alternatives: Substantive Opposition for Alternative 4 – East Rift Zone.....	5
CUL100: Native Hawaiian Organizations (NHO)/Kūpuna Concerns.....	5
ELE100 ATMP Elements: Annual Number of Air Tours .....	5
ELE200 ATMP Elements: Routes and Altitudes.....	5
ELE400 ATMP Elements: Day/Time.....	6
ELE500 ATMP Elements: Other.....	6
FAV100 Benefits of Air Tours .....	6
PRO100 Process Comments: Impact Analysis.....	6
PRO200 Process Comments: Public Review.....	6
PRO300 Process Comments: Alternatives Considered .....	7
PRO400 Process Comments: Other.....	7
PRO500 Process Comments: NEPA.....	7

## INTRODUCTION

An Air Tour Management Plan (ATMP) would provide the terms and conditions for commercial air tours conducted over Hawai‘i Volcanoes National Park (Park) pursuant to the National Parks Air Tour Management Act (Act) of 2000. The Act requires that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in cooperation with the National Park Service (NPS) (collectively, the agencies) establish an ATMP or voluntary agreement for each National Park System unit for which one or more applications to conduct commercial air tours has been submitted, unless that unit is exempt from this requirement because 50 or fewer commercial air tour operations are conducted over the Park on an annual basis. 49 U.S.C. § 40128(a)(5).

The objective of establishing an ATMP for the Park is to develop acceptable and effective measures to mitigate or prevent the significant adverse impacts, if any, of commercial air tours on natural and cultural resources, Native Hawaiian sacred sites and ceremonial areas, wilderness character, and visitor experience.

The agencies invited the public to comment on potential alternatives for an ATMP for the Park as part of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) public scoping process. The Park notified the public of the scoping period by issuing a press release, posting notice on the Park’s website and social media, and sending emails and hard copy mailings to the Park’s civic engagement stakeholder list and congressional officials. In addition, Park staff responded to media inquiries and requests for interviews. The agencies accepted comments from February 28 through April 1, 2022. The NPS published a newsletter describing the potential alternatives on the NPS Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website at the start of the scoping period and included the newsletter in the Park’s emails and hard copy mailing notifications. The newsletter on potential alternatives provided a project introduction, the purpose and need for the project, resources for consideration in the Environmental Assessment (EA), elements common to all the alternatives, and an overview of four potential alternatives including routes, altitudes, time-of-day restrictions, restrictions for particular events, maximum numbers of flights, and other provisions. The potential draft alternatives also include a justification for the provisions and conditions designed to protect Park resources and visitor experience.

Any comments entered into PEPC by members of the general public, as well as any written comments mailed to the NPS, were considered and included in the project file. The agencies will use public and stakeholder input to further refine or dismiss alternatives and potentially to consider new alternatives. The agencies will also use public input to inform the environmental analysis. Alternatives that are carried forward and analyzed in the EA will be available for public review and comment as part of the public comment period on the EA. This *Public Comment Summary Report* provides a summary of the substantive comments submitted during the public scoping period.

## COMMENT ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

Comment analysis is a process used to compile and correlate similar comments into a usable format for the agencies’ decision-makers and the program team. Comment analysis assists the agencies in organizing, clarifying, and addressing information and aids in identifying the topics and issues to be evaluated and considered throughout the ATMP planning process.

The process includes five main components:

- developing a coding structure;
- employing a comment database for comment management;
- reviewing and coding of comments;

- interpreting and analyzing the comments to identify issues and themes; and
- preparing a comment summary.

A coding structure was developed to help sort comments into logical groups by topic and issue. The coding structure was designed to capture the content of the comments rather than to restrict or exclude any ideas.

The NPS PEPC database was used to manage the public comments received. The database stores the full text of all correspondence and allows each comment to be coded by topic and category. The agencies read and analyzed all comments

Under each code, all comments were grouped by similar themes, and those groups were summarized with concern statements.

## COMMENT ANALYSIS

In total, 957 correspondences were received, of which 22 were duplicates. Therefore, the agencies received a total of 935 unique correspondences, which included 1,449 discrete comments. The term “correspondence,” as used in this report, refers to each submission offered by a commenter. The term “comment,” as used in this report, refers to an individual issue or concern raised by a commenter that was coded by topic and category. A single commenter may have raised multiple comments within a correspondence. Similarly, multiple commenters raised many of the same comments. Of the correspondences received, eight were identified as form letters. These form letters opposed the ATMP for various reasons all captured in the comment summaries below. The eight form letters were signed by a combined total of 465 signatories. There were other correspondences that were excerpts or shorter versions of the eight form letters, but the comment management software did not capture them as form letters.

## SUMMARY OF COMMENTS

The following section summarizes the comments received during the scoping period and is organized by code. The summarized text is formatted into concern statements to identify the thematic issues or concerns represented by comments within the code. The agencies only coded comments with substantive content. Substantive comments raise, debate, or question a point of fact or elements of the potential alternatives. Comments that merely support or oppose the potential alternatives are not considered substantive. There were 518 non-substantive comments received during the scoping period.

### **ADV100 Adverse Impacts: Soundscape Impacts**

1. Commenters stated that air tour noise adversely affects opportunities to experience quiet, peace, solitude, tranquility, and opportunities to hear natural sounds; adversely affects visitors that come to the Park to experience natural soundscapes or visit the backcountry and Kīlauea summit; adversely affects residents’ health and triggers post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for military personnel and veterans; and that air tours are incompatible with wilderness. Commenters also stated that air tours interfere with park visitor experience and park interpretive programs.
2. Commenters noted that many helicopters are heard at the same time or very frequently throughout the day at the Park, and increasing the altitude of aircrafts would disperse sound further.
3. Commenters stated that air tours interfere with acoustic-based bird surveys, avian studies, and interrupt recordings of bird species such as the ōma‘o and the ‘apapane. One commenter noted the noise over Highway 11 negatively impacts the education and safety at nearby schools.

### **ADV200 Adverse Impacts: Wildlife/Biological Impacts**

1. Commenters expressed concern about the negative impacts air tours would have on wildlife, specifically noting increases in heart rate, injury, stress, and predation, in addition to decreased hatching success and interferences with communication and breeding.
2. Commenters also noted that noise from air tours would adversely affect native species such as honey creepers, nēnē, Hawaiian hawks, ‘apapane, ‘i‘iwi, and pueo.

### **ADV300 Adverse Impacts: Endangered Species Impacts**

1. Commenters noted effects from air tourism, such as noise and wind turbulence, would have a negative impact on endangered species such as nēnē, Hawaiian hoary bat, ‘i‘iwi, ‘akiapōlā‘au, and ‘io, and their critical habitat. Concern was also expressed about impacts to the nearby Keauhou Bird Conservation Center.
2. Commenters stated that limiting air tours could result in more ground-based visitors which would have an impact on endangered species.

### **ADV400 Adverse Impacts: Wilderness Character Impacts**

1. Commenters opposed flights over wilderness and backcountry areas such as Mauna Loa and Nāpau, noting that air tours are incompatible with wilderness character and impact visitor experience.
2. Commenters suggested restrictions on flights within 0.5 miles of wilderness, and increasing the minimum altitudes above wilderness.

### **ADV500 Adverse Impacts: Cultural Resource Impacts**

1. Commenters noted the importance of the Park to Native Hawaiians and that the Park contains culturally significant resources, sites, temples, and burial grounds. Commenters noted air tours disrupt traditional and customary practices and activities of spiritual and cultural significance. Commenters noted the presence of Tutu Pele and importance of sites such as Kaluapele and Wahinekapu.
2. A commenter noted that the park is eligible for listing as a Traditional Cultural Property due to the importance to Native Hawaiians and their culture.

### **ADV600 Adverse Impacts: Visual Impacts**

1. Commenters noted air tours cause visual impacts that impede enjoyment of scenic qualities such as night skies, wilderness, and scenic vistas.

### **ADV700 Adverse Impacts: Equity**

1. Commenters noted that banning air tours limits the elderly and those with disabilities from viewing the Park.
2. Commenters noted that air tours do not meet Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements.
3. Commenters stated that a disproportionately small number of people who can afford or who can physically fit on the aircraft for air tours cause adverse impacts for most visitors and island residents.

**ADV800 Adverse Impacts: Climate Change, Greenhouse Gasses, and Air Quality**

1. Commenters stated that air tours contribute to air pollution, increased carbon footprint, and greenhouse gas emissions, which contribute to hazardous health conditions and harmful effects on ecosystems like the 'ōhi'a forest. Commenters also noted that ultra-fine particles have been associated with cardiovascular and neurological effects to humans, and are likely to affect the health of insects and other animals under the path of air tours.

**ADV900 Adverse Impacts: Other**

1. Commenters noted the restrictive measures in the ATMP would effectively eliminate air tours over the Park or introduce potentially unsafe policies for pilots. These commenters also stated Hawai'i air tours are the most regulated in the country and the proposals target an important part of the economy for the Island of Hawai'i.
2. Commenters voiced concern about accidents, unnecessary increased risk of danger due to accidents caused by weather and winds affecting air traffic safety, and concern for the potential for fires after an accident which would harm flora, fauna, and humans.

**ALT100 Alternatives: Substantive Support for Alternative 1 – No Action**

1. Commenters expressed support for Alternative 1 because it would allow these operations to continue to contribute to the overall economy of the State.

**ALT150 Alternatives: Substantive Opposition for Alternative 1 – No Action**

1. Commenters expressed opposition to Alternative 1 as it does not improve the current conditions and continues to cause impacts to noise, natural and cultural resources, wilderness character, and ground-based user experience.
2. Commenters suggested limiting flights but opposed Alternative 1 noting that the continuation of Interim Operating Authority (IOA) is significantly higher than the actual annual overflights since reporting began in 2013. Commenters also noted that one operator is flying 75% of the current flights and all operators combined are flying less than half of the IOA.

**ALT200 Alternatives: Substantive Support for Alternative 2 – No Air Tours in Planning Area**

1. Commenters expressed support for Alternative 2 as it provides the greatest protection from pollution, noise, and others adverse impacts from air tours. Commenters noted Alternative 2 would protect Native Hawaiian cultural practices, educational experiences, mental health, biological resources, endangered species, wilderness character, and ground-based visitor experience.

**ALT250 Alternatives: Substantive Opposition for Alternative 2 – No Air Tours in Planning Area**

1. Commenters opposed Alternative 2 for reasons such as interfering with accessibility of the Park and for the potential of causing a concentration of aircraft over communities near the ½-mile buffer, and as aircraft maneuver for position, loiter, and circle at altitudes above 5,000 feet (ft.) above ground level (AGL).

### **ALT300 Alternatives: Substantive Support for Alternative 3 – Mitigation Measures**

1. Commenters supported Alternative 3 on the basis that it restricts the visual and auditory impacts to Park visitors, provides quiet technology incentives, and includes restrictions such as limited operating hours, establishing no fly days on Sundays, and restricting circling or loitering.
2. Commenters suggested reducing the number of flights on Saturday and proposed a lower Kahuku route from Alternative 4, and altering the Pu‘u‘ō‘ō route to fixed entry and exit at the ocean.

### **ALT350 Alternatives: Substantive Opposition for Alternative 3 – Mitigation Measures**

1. Commenters expressed opposition to certain elements of Alternative 3 noting that the compressed tour hours would result in increased noise during a short time span and a concentration of aircraft in areas such as the remote coastline, Route 11, Pāhala, Pu‘u‘ō‘ō, Nāmakanipaio Campground, Kīlauea Military Camp, Volcano Golf Course and residential area, Steam Vents, Sulphur Banks, Kīlauea Visitor Center, Volcano School of Arts and Sciences, and Volcano Village.
2. Commenters stated that Alternative 3 would still result in aircraft noise and produce the same issues within the Park to a lesser degree such as impacts to park users’ enjoyment and serenity, wildlife, ecosystems, wilderness character, and cultural resources and practices.

### **ALT400 Alternatives: Substantive Support for Alternative 4 – East Rift Zone**

1. Commenters expressed support for elements of Alternative 4 including the limitations on the number of flights and days on which flights can occur in addition to the flight routes that are restricted to the East Rift Zone and further away from Kīpukapuauulu, an important bird watching trail, and populated areas of the Park.

### **ALT450 Alternatives: Substantive Opposition for Alternative 4 – East Rift Zone**

1. Commenters opposed Alternative 4 because it would lead to an increased concentration of aircraft along the Pu‘u‘ō‘ō route, the coastal zone, and the East Rift Zone. Commenters also noted that Alternative 4 would impact the Park’s natural and cultural resources, wilderness character, and the visitor experience. Commenters also noted opposition to Alternative 4 because it would only provide one no-fly day per week.

### **CUL100: Native Hawaiian Organizations (NHO)/Kūpuna Concerns**

1. Commenters expressed opposition to air tours, stating Native Hawaiians and Kūpuna believe the Kīlauea caldera is sacred, and suggested alternatives such as increasing the no-fly zone higher than the planning area.

### **ELE100 ATMP Elements: Annual Number of Air Tours**

1. Commenters suggested general limits to the annual number of flights and suggested various options including no fly days and caps on the number of tours per day.

### **ELE200 ATMP Elements: Routes and Altitudes**

1. Commenters suggested revisions to proposed routes and altitudes such as moving routes to fly offshore, increasing buffers, and changing the altitudes to 1,500 ft., 3,000 ft., 4,000 ft., or 5,000 ft. AGL as these measures would avoid highly populated areas and reduce impacts to wildlife, ecosystems, and cultural resources.

**ELE400 ATMP Elements: Day/Time**

1. Commenters expressed support of the proposed time and day restrictions to protect sacred places and sensitive habitats and to reduce noise impacts but also suggested permitting flights only one day a week and other flight times such as 10AM-3PM, 1PM-5PM, and 7PM-9PM.
2. Commenters noted that proposed flight times can interfere with cultural practices that occur at sunrise and sunset.

**ELE500 ATMP Elements: Other**

1. Commenters called for increased and measurable ways to enforce restrictions as well as flight monitoring and systems to track complaints and violations.
2. Commenters requested consultation regarding applicability with the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act (CZMA) as well as consultations with Hawai'i residents.
3. Commenters expressed concern regarding the 2-month notice requirement for cultural practices and recommended that qualifying events be clearly outlined.
4. Commenters stated that loitering and circling should not be permitted along any route and that quiet technology should be required for all helicopters without any special hours or days.
5. Commenters expressed concern that the alternatives are too restrictive and may cause safety concerns for the pilots.
6. Commenters suggested aircraft include clear identification numbers on the bottom of the aircraft so individuals can identify them and file a report if necessary. Commenters also noted frustration in reporting violations and requested instructions.

**FAV100: Benefits of Air Tours**

1. Commenters identified benefits of air tours such as increased revenue for the State; reductions in the number of visitors in wilderness or over-crowded areas; the ability to share the culture and history of Hawai'i; accessibility of the Park to handicapped, disabled, and elderly; ability to provide a unique vantage point of the Park; and that air tours do not require Park infrastructure or personnel.

**PRO100 Process Comments: Impact Analysis**

1. Several commenters suggested that Federal agencies validate data provided by operators to ensure accuracy.
2. Commenters requested disclosure of the impacts of air tourism on the economy, sacred sites, Park infrastructure, climate change, air quality, noise pollution, noise resulting from the use of quiet technology, wilderness, safety, wildlife, endangered birds and nēnē, ADA accessibility, environmental justice, and local residents. One commenter stated indirect impacts must be thoroughly analyzed and presented in the overall analysis.
3. Many commenters requested that the impacts to nearby residences and communities be analyzed including outside the planning area.

**PRO200 Process Comments: Public Review**

1. Commenters stated concern that the agencies have not coordinated with or requested input from Native Hawaiian communities and individuals, stakeholders, residents, or air tour operators.
2. Commenters noted the difficulty in finding and commenting on the document and commenters voiced concern on the request for substantive comments rather than voting on a preferred alternative.



**PRO300 Process Comments: Alternatives Considered**

1. Commenters suggested a blend of the elements from Alternatives 3 and 4, such as keeping the flight paths from Alternative 4 but with the mandatory interpretive training and education as well as quiet technology incentives of only allowing quiet technology flights on Wednesdays; limited time of day restrictions from Alternative 3 with the more limited routes in Alternative 4; no loitering/circling per Alternative 3; daily flight caps from Alternative 4; making the Southwest Rift Zone a regular route in Alternative 3; adding a Kahuku route as in Alternative 4; setting minimum altitudes at 2,000 ft. AGL on all routes; mandatory interpretive training; and 3-mile event restrictions.
2. Commenters proposed another alternative that restricts air tours in all areas of the Park and for a greater distance outside the Park.

**PRO400 Process Comments: Other**

1. Commenters requested more information on ATMP timelines as well as practical, measurable resource protection objectives along the lines of desired future conditions, which when combined with systematic monitoring can be used as the basis for future evaluation of the effectiveness of the plan in accomplishing its resource protection goals.

**PRO500 Process Comments: NEPA**

1. Commenters noted the Park has conducted a proper planning process in accordance with Council of Environmental Quality NEPA implementing regulations and the NPS NEPA Handbook 2015.