

Vieques

Cleanup Fact Sheet



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Controlled Burning in the Submunitions Area of Vieques

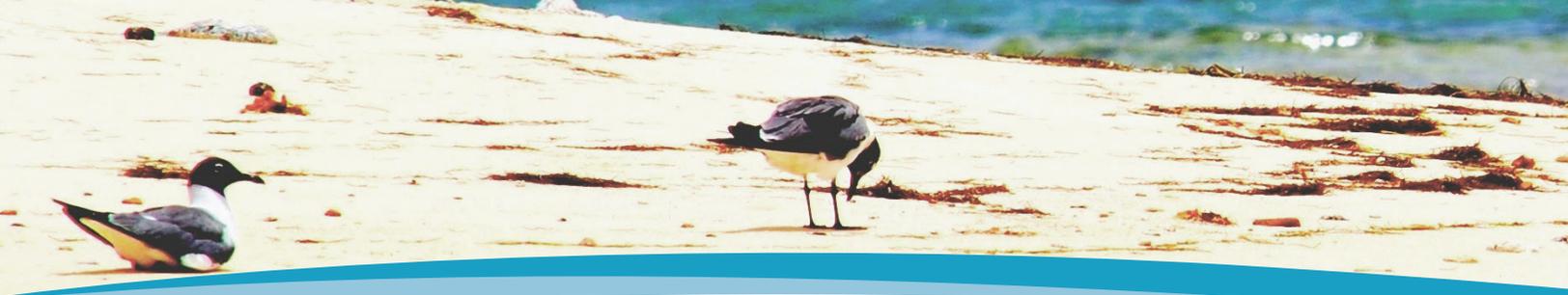
Summary

Submunitions are small bombs, or “bomblets,” that are released from larger cluster munitions. Within the former bombing range on Vieques, the 75-acre Submunitions Area contains thousands of dangerous submunitions that are lying on the ground surface and are hidden under vegetation. These submunitions are shock-sensitive and may explode if moved or disturbed in any way. This situation poses a very high risk to anyone who may enter the area, including local residents, tourists, wildlife managers, and cleanup workers. In order for cleanup workers to see the submunitions, avoid accidental contact, and clear the submunitions safely, the vegetation must be removed. The Navy has determined that the only safe method for vegetation removal is to conduct small (1 to 2 acre) controlled burns. Air modeling and extensive air sampling over a period of 8 years indicate that the burn events will comply with air quality standards, and smoke from the burn events will not reach any residences or businesses, which are 8 miles from the Submunitions Area. Therefore, controlled burning in the Submunitions Area can be conducted in a manner that is protective of human health and the environment.

In order to protect the safety of wildlife managers, local residents, cleanup workers, and visitors to Vieques who may enter this dangerous location, the Submunitions Area must be cleared of munitions. Controlled burning of vegetation is necessary in the Submunitions Area to allow workers to see the submunitions, avoid accidental contact, and clear the submunitions safely.



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Why is the Submunitions Area so dangerous?

The 75-acre Submunitions Area contains thousands of submunitions that are extremely sensitive and very small – small enough to hide under vegetation, and sensitive enough to explode if accidentally bumped, stepped on, or disturbed in any way. Although they are small, submunitions contain enough explosive material to kill or maim people.



Why burn the Submunitions Area when other areas have been cleared without burning?

The Navy has safely cleared munitions from over 3,600 acres that lie outside the Submunitions Area. This work was performed without the need to burn vegetation because the munitions were large enough to be seen, or stable enough to be stepped on or bumped accidentally without exploding. In contrast, submunitions are small and easily hidden by vegetation, and many submunitions are very sensitive and ready to explode if they are accidentally bumped, stepped on, or disturbed in any way. As a result, it would be unsafe for site workers to remove the vegetation manually, or to enter the area and attempt to clear the submunitions while the site is covered with vegetation. Simply

cutting the vegetation will not work because the cut vegetation would remain on the ground surface and continue to hide the submunitions. The vegetation in the Submunitions Area must be burned to allow workers to see the submunitions, avoid accidental contact, and clear the submunitions safely.

Why not just leave the Submunitions Area alone?

The Submunitions Area is dangerous, and it must be addressed. Despite access restrictions and the remote location, it is possible that local residents or tourists may wander into the Submunitions Area, where they would face a significant risk of being maimed or killed. While the Navy's on-going cleanup activities have reduced the explosive hazard in surrounding areas, the Submunitions Area continues to present a severe threat of explosion and an imminent and substantial danger. The Navy is unwilling to allow this dangerous situation to continue. Therefore, as the lead agency under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA), the Navy has invoked CERCLA Section 121(e)(1) in order to proceed with a time critical response action in the Submunitions Area.

How will the burns be conducted?

The controlled burns will follow procedures described in the Submunitions Area Removal Action Work Plan for the Time Critical Removal of Munitions within the Live Impact Area at the former Vieques Naval Training Range (NAVFAC Atlantic, 2016). This document has undergone review by the Puerto Rico Environmental Quality Board (PREQB), the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER),

the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS). Each burn will cover 1 to 2 acres and last for several hours. Following each burn, workers will take 1 to 2 weeks to clear the area of munitions and set up the next burn. It is expected that controlled burns will occur 2 to 4 times per month over a period of 2 to 3 years. In accordance with the work plan, the Navy will install fire breaks and initiate burning only during times of favorable weather conditions. Although the work plan has undergone agency review, approval for the burns from PREQB is pending.

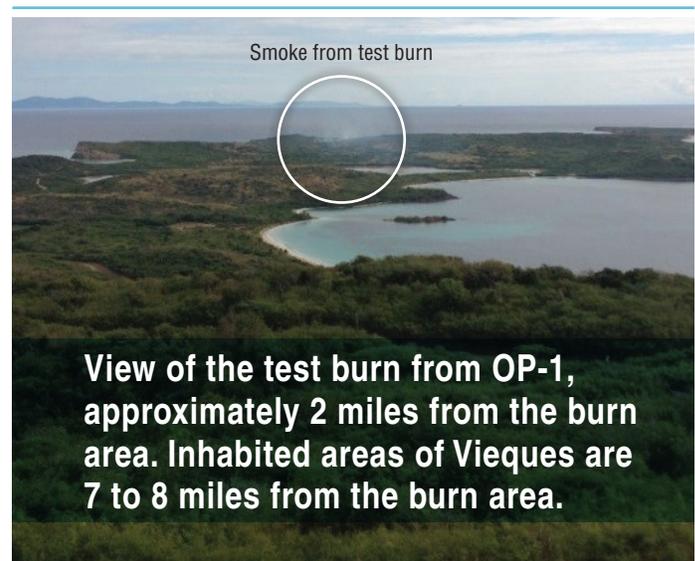
How does the Navy know the burning will be effective?

For a variety of purposes, controlled burns are conducted successfully and safely at other military facilities across the country. In order to evaluate controlled burning on Vieques, the Navy conducted a test burn on January 20, 2015, within a 2 acre portion of the Submunitions Area. The fire removed leaves and vegetation from the ground surface, allowing workers to see submunitions that had been hidden. Thus, they were able to avoid the danger of accidentally disturbing or stepping on submunitions. Workers also saw that many submunitions had detonated or burned out during the controlled burn and were no longer a threat. As a result, the burn provided an immediate and significant reduction in the safety hazard for site workers, and the test area was successfully surface cleared of submunitions.

What about the smoke?

Since the populated areas of Vieques are approximately 8 miles from the Submunitions Area, smoke from the controlled burns will not reach any residences or businesses.

This conclusion has been confirmed many times during the past 10 years. Since 2005, the Navy has collected over 50 air samples during 19 accidental brush fires in the former bombing range. No explosive compounds were detected in any of the 50 air samples, and concentrations of particulate matter and metals were all in compliance with air quality standards. In addition, the Navy has completed air modeling of a hypothetical 103 acre fire in the Submunitions Area, which is highly conservative since the proposed burns would cover only 1 to 2 acres. The air model of the hypothetical fire showed no effect on the residential areas of Vieques. Overall, the air sampling and air modeling show that burning in the Submunitions Area can be conducted in a manner that is protective of human health and the environment. In order to provide ongoing confirmation of this conclusion, air monitoring for explosive compounds, metals, particulate matter, and carbon monoxide will occur during burn events in the Submunitions Area.





How will the burns be controlled?

The thin soil in the Submunitions Area supports little or no grass cover, so fires are difficult to start, and they spread very little before going out. During the 2015 test burn, remote controlled equipment was used to cut the vegetation, and the cut vegetation was allowed to dry for several weeks prior to burning. The cut vegetation burned successfully, but the fire went out when it reached uncut vegetation at the boundaries of the test area. Thus the fire was readily controlled and contained within the planned area. For additional control measures, the Navy will maintain fire breaks and initiate burning only during times of favorable weather conditions.



Submunitions fully visible after being burned out and rendered safe during the test burn.

What about endangered species?

Sea turtles are the only threatened or endangered species that may be in the vicinity of the controlled burns. Turtle monitoring will be conducted on any beach that may be affected by a particular controlled burn, and fire breaks will be added as needed to protect the beach. If turtle monitoring is conducted, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER) will be given the opportunity to participate.

What about erosion?

The Navy will install erosion control measures as needed to prevent erosion from the Submunitions Area. During the past 11 years of munitions clearance on Vieques, these erosion control measures have proven to be reliable and effective. In addition, the potential for erosion will be minimized because the controlled burns will occur only in small areas, and the vegetation will grow back quickly.

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