



# UNITED STATES NAVY ENVIRONMENTAL FACT SHEET MAY 2000

## NOMANS LAND ISLAND CHILMARK, MASSACHUSETTS

### BACKGROUND

#### Location and Site History

Nomans Land Island is located 2.7 miles southwest of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and is part of Chilmark Township. The U.S. Navy began leasing the island for use as a practice bombing range in November 1943. After World War II, the Navy retained control of the island and continued training exercises. The Navy purchased the island from the Crane Estate in 1952. Only inert dummy ordnance was used after 1953, and use of the island for target practice ceased entirely in May 1996.

#### Base Realignment & Closure (BRAC)

The Naval Air Station, South Weymouth managed the island while it was used as a bombing range. The island, along with the Air Station, were declared excess to military needs by the 1995 BRAC law. The formal BRAC process was followed to determine the best reuse of the property. This resulted in transfer of the island to the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in 1998, for use as an unstaffed wildlife refuge. The BRAC law requires cleanup appropriate for the reuse. Consequently, the Navy is responsible for ensuring conditions are suitable for use as a wildlife refuge.



**Aerial View of Nomans Land Island**

## NATURAL RESOURCES

In spite of the Navy's use of Nomans Land Island as a bombing range, it has always supported an abundance of wildlife. Environmentalists have long been interested in protecting this unique natural resource. In the 1960's, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and environmental groups requested that the military protect the island as a key nesting area for migratory birds. An agreement was made in 1970 between the Navy and the Department of Interior (DOI) to protect wildlife on the island. A Joint Management Agreement between the Navy and the DOI was signed in 1975 and included continued military use of the island, as well as management of portions of the island for migratory birds and other wildlife. The eastern third of the island was designated as a no-fire zone and was protected as a wildlife sanctuary.



**Aerial View of Rainbow Pond**

Diverse upland and wetland habitats contain a number of Federal and State listed threatened and endangered species, including Spotted Turtles, Upland Sandpiper, Marsh Hawk, Peregrine Falcon, and several varieties of Terns. The island also provides excellent nesting conditions for several other bird species. This diversity is

maintained by periodic, naturally occurring fires that promote growth of beneficial grasses. Canadian geese, ducks, herons, and snowy egrets are also known to inhabit the island. In addition to nesting habitat, the island provides a stopover for migratory bird species as a feeding and resting site.



**Species of Orchid on Nomans Island**

Several plants of note are found on the island as well, including Grass Pink, Dragons-Mouth, and Seaside Yarrow.

## ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

The Navy conducted an Environmental Baseline Survey in 1996 as part of the BRAC process. It identified items and placed them in one of two categories. The first category consisted of common items that result from human occupation. These included oil tanks, pipelines, and debris left by the Navy from years ago when a small contingent was stationed on the island to help manage practice-bombing activities. The second category covered potential contamination from the use of practice ordnance on the island. Environmental actions taken by the Navy are described in detail below. Potential Unexploded Ordnance (UXO) presents a unique safety concern that is managed jointly with other environmental concerns.

---

## COMPLETED ACTIONS

### Controlled Burn

As the Navy made plans to remove ordnance debris from the surface of the island and conduct other environmental work, a controlled burn of vegetation was proposed to make the surface more visible and accessible. With USFWS support, the Navy went before the Chilmark Conservation Commission on 8 April 1998 for approval. The burn on 28 April cleared approximately 70% of the island. Timing of the burn was also controlled to minimize impact on wildlife and to improve the wildlife habitat on the island. Controlled burns had also been conducted in some previous years to help clear UXO.

### Unexploded Ordnance Clearance

Similar to other environmental work, the extent of UXO work is based on reuse of the land. A surface sweep of UXO was required to make the island suitable for reuse as an unmanned wildlife refuge, and to facilitate other environmental work. The plan for conducting this work was approved by the Department of Defense Explosives Safety Board (DDESB), which was established by Congress to protect the public from exposure to explosive hazards. An initial sweep was performed in 1997 by a Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) Team. In 1998, a Navy contractor completed the removal of surface UXO and debris.

11,021 ordnance items were collected, weighing more than 550,000 pounds. In addition, nearly 60,000 pounds of non-ordnance scrap was collected. All of the ordnance items were practice rounds.

However, 4,047 items were considered suspect (containing small smoke-charge or residual rocket fuel) and were explosively vented to ensure safe handling. The UXO and other debris was removed from the island for disposal.

### Radiological Screening

A search of historical information by the Navy concluded that no ammunition containing radioactive depleted uranium (DU) was used on Nomans Land Island. Regardless, false information raised public concerns and, at MADEP request, the Navy tested all ordnance for radioactivity before it left the island. The testing plan was reviewed by both MADEP and the Gay Head Board of Selectmen, and work was conducted by a firm recommended by MADEP. No DU radiation was detected in the survey.

### Tank and Pipeline Removal

Four underground fuel tanks and a fuel pipeline were indicated in island historical records. A plan for removal of the pipeline was submitted to the Chilmark Conservation Commission on 12 May 1998, and reviewed during a hearing on 27 May. The removals were conducted between June and August 1998. Contaminated soil found beneath three of the tanks was removed and transported off the island following MADEP regulations. The tanks and piping were transported off the island to a scrap yard. All sampling results complied with MADEP standards.

### Preliminary Site Investigation

A Preliminary Site Investigation was conducted to assess any contamination in soil, sediment, surface water and

groundwater resulting from ordnance. Approximately 200 samples were collected from the most likely areas of contamination. Some samples showed elevated levels of lead and zinc. Only one sample showed an explosive contaminant (TNT) that was barely detectable (1 ppm). Results are shown in a report dated 1 October 1998. However, additional testing was proposed.

## **PLANNED/ONGOING ACTIONS**

### **Further Site Investigation**

Additional site investigation is currently being performed. The purpose is to further assess whether contaminants found in the previous investigation may be a threat to human health or the environment. The investigation includes additional sampling of soil, sediment, surface water, and groundwater. Four rounds of quarterly sampling (approximately 25 samples each time) are included to account for seasonal changes. A final report will be prepared once all sampling has been completed. Results will determine if additional actions are needed.

### **Public Access**

Nomans Land Island and surrounding waters are restricted from all public access. USFWS supports the restricted access to protect the unique wildlife and habitat of the island. Restricted access is also required at this time to protect the public from possible UXO.

### **Public Involvement**

Public input has been and will continue to be solicited. Public Information

Sessions were held in January 1997, April 1998, and June 1998 at local sites on Martha's Vineyard to inform the public of each phase of work, and coordination with public representatives has occurred on various occasions.

Documents and reports pertaining to Navy environmental actions on the island are maintained for public review in Information Repositories in Chilmark, Aquinnah, and NAS South Weymouth. Notification of the availability of reports and future decision documents for the site will be published in local newspapers, and will be provided to local officials. Concerned citizens may have their names added to the notification list, and offer questions and comments, by contacting the Caretaker Site Office at NAS South Weymouth (address provided below).

## **Additional Information**

Additional Information and copies of reports are available for review in the Information Repositories at the following locations:

Chilmark Town Office  
Chilmark, MA 02535  
POC: Bea Endriga

Aquinnah (Gay Head) Township  
Building  
Aquinnah, MA 02535  
POC: Carl Widdiss

Caretaker Site Office  
NAS South Weymouth  
1134 Main St, Bldg 11  
South Weymouth, MA 02190