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## Vandenberg Space Force Launch Increase

A proposal to drastically increase the number of SpaceX rocket launches out of Vandenberg Space Force Base can move forward to the next step of approval as soon as it passes an environmental impact assessment. Vandenberg Space Force Base held a virtual public meeting on Thursday, Jan. 23 to discuss the environmental implications of these launches.

“The overall launch cadence would increase from 50 Falcon 9 launches per year at SLC-4 to 100 launches per year,” said Sam Lowry, an environmental consultant for ManTech International, a firm hired by Vandenberg Space Force as the contractor for launch range systems engineering and integration support.

Elon Musk’s SpaceX is a private aerospace company that launches rockets into space, many from its Vandenberg Space Force Base, located in Lompoc, California. Not only would the proposed action double the current launch count from there, it would also mean converting the Horizontal Integration Facility, where the rockets are currently stored, into a SpaceX hangar.

Reading from a slide deck created by the U.S. Air Force, Lowry referred to another possibility which he called, “Alternative 1,” which would implement the same increase in launches as the proposed action but would involve the construction of a new hangar rather than modifying the existing one. He also outlined a third option, the “No Action Alternative”, which would halt the proposal.

In the previous week, three consecutive in-person public meetings held by Vandenberg Space Force Base to discuss this proposal made their way up the coast. The first was in Ventura, the second in Santa Barbara, and the most recent took place in the center of the controversy, Lompoc, where the launch base is located. This public-scoping period, fulfilled by these four meetings, is a requirement by the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA), and must take place before the proposal can be approved.

Thursday’s slideshow listed some of the specific environmental impacts the statement is considering. Air quality and climate, noise, terrestrial biological resources, marine biological resources, water resources, and cultural resources, are just a few on the extensive list. The assessment is meant to act as a thorough review of the potential impacts on these environmental and ecological systems, should the proposed action be approved.

Plans to redevelop Space Launch Complex-6, a SpaceX launch pad, as well as allow landings

in the Pacific Ocean from Falcon 9 launches, were also discussed. The effect of an issuance or modification of a vehicle operator license to SpaceX for operations at Vandenberg Space Force Base, as well as agreement to related airspace closures, was also an aspect of the proposal.

Lowry clearly described the proposal and alternatives, but meeting attendees were prohibited from actively participating in the virtual meeting, as the chat, video, and microphone features were disabled. Instead, when the presentation concluded, listeners were invited to submit public comments only through a provided email or mailing address.

This restriction of public comments was not a side effect of the online format of the meeting, but an occurrence throughout the three prior in-person meetings as well. In an interview conducted by News Channel 3-12 at the Lompoc meeting, community member Janet Blevins said she was surprised and disappointed. “Everyone else I know here who came expected what I expected, which was it was gonna be a sit down meeting where people could publicly comment.” Much like the online meeting, the in-person meetings were set up to primarily inform on the proposed action and alternatives, rather than act as an active comment forum for the public, meeting attendees said.

If the proposal completes the NEPA public meeting requirements, the project is still far from approved. The virtual meeting displayed a flowchart titled, “NEPA Process for Preparing an Environmental Impact Statement” which pictured the entire process for a proposal like this one to be passed. The graphic showed that this public scoping period was the second step of a six-step process, set to end when a record of decision is issued in fall of 2025.