

Row over the park

The issue centres around turning the former Homestead Air Force Base into a major commercial airport. The FAA is for, the environmentalists against. And at the heart of the issue is noise. The two sides disagree on how to measure human noise and what constitutes the 'natural' sound of the parks.

The FAA says it mounted the most extensive sound study it has ever done, assessing noise with data collected in four separate studies, including one commissioned by the park service.

Overall, while the FAA admits noise would increase through much of the parks – particularly the amount of time airplanes could be heard, which in some cases would climb by more than two hours – it dismisses the impact as marginal, except near the runway.

"The FAA cannot identify or quantify an impairment on park resources independent from the effects of noise on people and wildlife," the study says. "Noise does not linger in the environment as a permanent impact or impairment."

'Minimal effects'

By the FAA's measure, the airport, even at maximum use, would expose only an additional 645 more residents to what it considers problem noise of 60 to 65 decibels – the threshold where about 12 percent of people pronounce themselves "highly annoyed."

The FAA also found that both parks already are tainted by hubbub – motor boats, air-conditioning units and especially military flights, which would remain the loudest sources.

At some sites, the FAA further noted, birds and insects were louder than anything else, including distant planes. "In effect, even though aircraft may be present, their noise can be

acoustically 'masked' by the sound of nature."

Study falls deaf

Critics say the agency's sophisticated study falls deaf to what seems obvious to the untrained ear.

In isolated places like the mouth of the Shark River on the southwestern coast of Everglades National Park, almost directly beneath a flight path that could eventually bring in some 100 or more planes a day, hours often pass between the sight of high-flying jets. Because of conflicts with Miami International Airport, Homestead's planes will be even on lower flight tracks, some as low as 2,000 feet.

The biggest problem, says the park services' Spokesman, is that the FAA uses an averaging technique that overstates outside intrusions and "badly distorts the record."

The FAA is also applying standards totally unsuited to national parks, he says. "The things we object to may make sense in an urban area, but I think there is a special case to be made in national parks."

Pickard of the FAA questions the expertise of the park service. The standard for "natural" sound the park service is pushing nationally, she said, is "way too conservative."

"It would exclude 90 percent of sound in the parks," she says, "including a lot of natural noises like birds and insects and waves lapping the shore, not to mention people talking."

New policies

The dispute is also reflected in separate, sweeping new national policies from both agencies.

The FAA in July released a draft updating its noise abatement policy for

If the government allows an airport to be built here, "it will be driving a stake through the heart of national parks all across the country," said Kevin Collins of the National Parks and Conservation Association. The 'here' he is talking about is the Biscayne National Park in Florida.

barriers to noise

the first time in 26 years. In it, the agency states it will pay “special consideration” to national parks but doesn’t spell out specifics and reasserts its authority over setting noise standards.

The agency also cites strides in cutting noise pollution, saying the population exposed to problem levels has dropped from about seven million to a half-million. Planes also are getting quieter, says James Erickson, director of the FAA’s office of environment and energy.

To the park service, the balance is severely tilted toward planes rather than parks.

“There’s a continuing dialogue, but unfortunately it’s been mostly confrontational,” says the parks service. Largely in response to the Homestead proposal, the park service six years ago ordered Biscayne National to draw up a landmark document – the nation’s first protection plan for the natural “soundscape”.

This year, the service beefed up noise policies nationwide by officially labeling natural sound a “resource” and asking all national parks to produce similar plans.

Limiting sources

The effort extends beyond airplanes and new sources of noise, taking what some park visitors have called a radical step – limiting or even banning some old sources. Some parks have restricted snow mobiles. Biscayne and others banned water bikes last year.

Though Biscayne’s policy has been bogged down in politics over the sensitive Everglades restoration legislation, it could include banning motorboats from some sensitive shallow and near-shore areas as well as slow speed zones.

Linda Canzanelli, Biscayne’s superintendent, acknowledges those proposals are likely to draw public flak in a popular, widely used park that is 95 percent water and far from pristine.

But there are still plenty of sanctuaries of isolation and peace like Jones Lagoon, she says.

“We look at the natural sounds as intrinsically valuable,” she says.

“While we’re concerned about noise impacts and how visitors feel about noise, it’s not our only concern. One of the reasons we have parks is to preserve resources, and we consider the lapping of waves and the sound of herons some of those resources.”

noise notes

Noise complaints – national figure

Nearly 239,000 complaints about noise were reported in 2000/01 by local authorities in England and Wales – about twice as many as in 1990/91. Complaints about industrial and commercial premises were 19 per cent of the total (CIEH, 2001).