

Environmental Impact Assessment

Screening according to Schedule III of S.L. 549.46

Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection

Screening according to S.L. 549.44

ERA Reference no.: EA 00007/22
PA Reference no.: PA 07333/22
Project Title: Proposed upgrading of existing airfield including the extension of the runway, construction of a concrete-surfaced apron, three grass-reinforced aprons and perimetral retaining walls, shifting of security fence and new landscaping.
Location: Gozo Rural Airfield, Triq ta' Lambert, Għajnsielem
Screening date: 21 December 2022

I. BACKGROUND

1. Outline of Proposal

- 1.1 The proposal is for the extension of the existing runway, which is currently 174m long, to a total length of 445m including a safety area of 30m on each end of the airstrip. The extents of the extension will therefore be 271m in length and 20m in width. The envisaged upgrades are planned predominately within the airfield-designated territory and are according to current international standards (ICAO and EASA).
- 1.2 The proposed airfield would enable the introduction of an inter-island service between Gozo and the Malta International Airport (MIA). The runway dimensions would preclude the operation of medium and large-sized aircraft. General aviation aircraft operations shall be limited to daytime only (i.e. 30 minutes past sunrise until 30 minutes before sunset), whilst the inter-island air service aircraft will be limited to flights between 06:00 hours and 01:00 hours. Less than 15 aircraft movements daily including the scheduled flights are being projected.
- 1.3 Three areas for parking facilities for light aircraft (Aprons 2, 3 and 4) shall be surfaced with a reinforced-grass paving system. A hard-standing area for the inter-island air service aircraft parking is proposed (Apron 1). Refer to **Table 1**.
- 1.4 The perimeter retaining walls, which are required in order to relevel the land such that the runway and aprons have the gradients in accordance with statutory aviation regulations, shall be stepped to avoid sheer heights along the public roads and allow for the introduction of landscaping around the periphery of the site. The proposal is also for the shifting of security fencing to the site perimeter and the relocation of the windsock. No buildings are being proposed as part of this development.

- 1.5 The PDS states that this infrastructural project is envisaged to be completed by year 2023. The airfield must remain operational during the course of the works in view of the requirement for air-ambulance helicopters to operate.

Table 1: Site areas of the runway, aprons, landscaping and remaining areas within the airfield.

Site Area Description	Circa. Area (m ²)
Existing runway being resurfaced (174m long, 20m wide)	3,480
Runway extension (including safety and maneuvering areas)	7,900
Apron 1 (concrete-paved)	2,400
Apron 2 (reinforced-grass)	12,000
Apron 3 (reinforced-grass)	18,000
Apron 4 (mainly reinforced-grass)	3,200
Perimeter landscaping	4,300
Remaining areas within airfield extents (not affected by proposal)	24,720
Total Site Area	76,000



Figure 1: Aerial ortho-photo showing the location of the proposal in red (Source: ERA MEPS Geoportal, 2018).



Figure 2: Close-up aerial ortho-photo showing the site extents of the proposal (Source: ERA MEPS Geoportal, 2018).

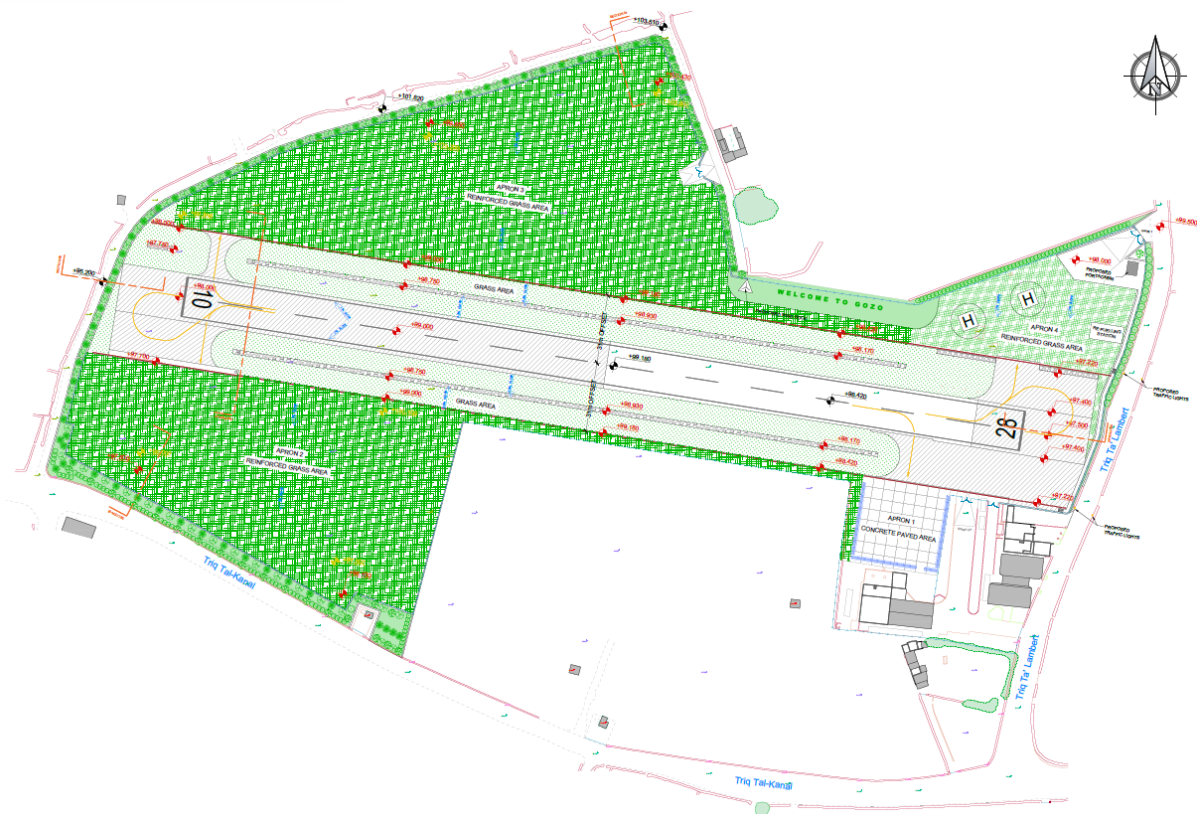


Figure 3: Proposed Block Plan (Source: PDS at Doc PA/07333/22/1h).



Figure 4: Photomontage of the proposal for the Gozo Airfield (Source: PDS at Doc PA/07333/22/1h).

2. Site context

- 2.1 The site is located on the outskirts of Xewkija, Gozo along Triq ta' Lambert (**Figure 1**). The Gozo and Comino Local Plan, 2006 (GCLP), specifically GCLP Map 14.13A, marks the area in question as "Heliport" and GCLP Map 14.13E as "area reserved for Aviation Facilities" under Policy GZ-Tran-14.
- 2.2 The existing heliport consists of two 22-metre wide helipads which are connected by asphalted runway 10/28, 174m long. Scheduled helicopter flights used to operate between Malta International Airport and the Xewkija Heliport in the past, however at present, the heliport is only used in cases of emergency.
- 2.3 The site lies within the groundwater safeguard zone and is designated as a Bird Sanctuary, 'Ta' Lambert' scheduled under Legal Notice 41/03. The Bird Sanctuary is only a nominal environmental constraint and is not really related to environmental protection. Consequently, it is related to the establishment of a no-shooting zone for the purpose of public safety.
- 2.4 The location of the project falls in the vicinity of the following environmental designations:
- Rđumijiet ta' Ghawdex: Ta' Ċenċ which is a Natura 2000 Special Protection Area (SPA) - MT0000027;
 - L-Inħawi ta' Ta' Ċenċ which is a Natura 2000 Sites of Community Importance (SCI) - MT0000034;
 - Mġarr ix-Xini valley watercourse which is an Area of Ecological Importance (AEI) and a Site of Scientific Importance (SSI) with Level 1 degree of protection as per G.N. 937 of 2001;
 - Mġarr ix-Xini valley sides which are an AEI with Level 2 and 3 degree of protection as per G.N. 937 of 2001;
 - Żona fil-Baħar bejn Il-Ponta tal-Ħotba u Tal-Fessej (Għawdex) which is a Natura 2000 SCI - MT0000104; and
 - Żona fil-Baħar ta' madwar Għawdex which is a Natura 2000 SPA - MT0000112.
- 2.5 The following are the cultural heritage features that lie in the vicinity to the location of the project:
- It-torri u l-kappella ta' Santa Ċilja situated on Triq Ta' Lambert, which are Grade 1 scheduled cultural heritage features as per G. N. 360 of 1996 lie a few metres north of the site; and
 - The Dry Stone Wall situated in Mġarr ix-Xini valley, which is a Grade 1 scheduled cultural heritage feature as per G.N. 937 of 2001 lies to the south of the site along with some other Grade 3 features.

3. Site history

3.1 This site has been previously subject to the following Planning Applications, Enforcement Notices and Development Notification Order:

- PA/01864/94; Extension of Helipad facilities Phase 1 - Construction of Final Approach & Take-Off Area (FATO) - Urgently needed in view of safety requirements. Phase 2 - Second Helipad, Taxi-way, two helicopter parking areas, parking for fire vehicles, access road and fencing – Approved.
- PA/02774/95; Malta-Gozo Air Services - Upgrading of Gozo Terminal Facilities – Approved.
- PA/00158/96; For Malta - Gozo Air Services, upgrading of Gozo Terminal facilities – Approved.
- PA/06726/96; 1. Construction of fire station facilities. 2. Construction of observation room and underlying stores. 3. Relocation of the security fence 4. Asphalt paving access to fire station and helipad area – Approved.
- EC/00424/95; Dumping of material without permit - Permission was granted to sanction the illegal development.
- EC/01171/95; Upgrading of gozo terminal facilities without permit - Permission was granted to sanction the illegal development.
- EC/00386/98; Heliport lounge without permit - Permission was granted to sanction the illegal development.
- DN/01609/13; Deposition of material or soil on existing agricultural land – Approved.

4. Screening Criteria

4.1 EIA Screening *(citations refer to S.L. 549.46, except where otherwise specified)*

The proposed development falls within the scope of the Environmental Impact Assessment Regulations (S.L. 549.46), notably in terms of following Category II criteria in Schedule I:

- a) *Section 1.0.2.1 (Development with a site area of 2ha or more);*
- b) *Section 2.2.2.1 (Expansion of an airport, airstrip or airfield, not falling within Category I); and*
- c) *Section 2.2.2.2 (Construction or expansion of a heliport, other than a helipad located within the development zone).*
- d) *Section 13.0.2.1 (Any change to, or extension of, projects [even if the project is already authorised, executed or in the process of being executed], particularly projects covered by Category I or Category II, where the change or extension itself does not fall under Category I but: (i) meets the thresholds or criteria set out in Category II; or (ii) may have significant adverse effects on the environment).*

4.2 AA Screening *(citations refer to S.L. 549.44, except where otherwise specified)*

In view that the proposal lies in the vicinity of the area of influence of the following Natura 2000 sites, as declared through the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations (SL 549.44):

- MT0000027 (*Rdumijiet ta' Ghawdex: Ta' Ċenċ*): SPA – International Importance;
- MT0000034 (*L-Inħawi ta' Ċenċ*) SCI – International Importance;
- MT0000104 (*Żona fil-Baħar bejn Il-Ponta tal-Ħotba u Tal-Fessej [Għawdex]*) SCI – International Importance;
- MT0000112 (*Żona fil-Baħar ta' madwar Għawdex*): SPA - International Importance.

This proposal has also been screened in terms of Regulation 19 of the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations (S.L. 549.44).

5. Documents used for screening

- i. Project Description Statement (PDS) along with appendices which was referred to ERA through a consultation by the Planning Authority on 21st November 2022; and
- ii. Gozo and Comino Local Plan, 2006 (GCLP).

II. ASSESSMENT OF PROPOSAL

6. Screening in terms of Schedule III of the EIA Regulations, S.L. 549.46

Ecology, Land and Resource Use

- 6.1 The site is barren from any vegetation, trees in particular and therefore no significant impacts on ecology are envisaged vis-à-vis the proposed interventions during construction and operation.
- 6.2 Although the proposed interventions namely the upgrading and extension of the runway and the construction of the aprons will take up an approximate area of 40,000 sq.m, which is currently soil area, the nature of the proposal is coherent with the specifically designated airport-related activities. In this regard, there are no significant concerns relating to the land use.
- 6.3 With regards to resource use, an approximate 13,050 cb.m of Type 1 unbound (filling/levelling) material, 2,720 cb.m of asphalt and 625 cb.m of concrete will be utilised for construction. As regards operation, the PDS states that no raw materials will be required. In this regard, no significant environmental impacts are envisaged.
- 6.4 The PDS also states that there will not be any further demands on power and water supplies, other than the upgrading/provision of the ground and apron lighting. In this regard, ERA views positively the proposal for the installation of energy-efficient luminaries/lighting systems. Furthermore, the provision of charging points for the use of electric vehicles and aircrafts; as well as storm-water conservation measures such as permeable-flooring and use of soakaways are considered positive in environmental terms.

Waste and Geo-Environment

- 6.5 The proposed development will involve the excavation of approximately 6,000 cb.m of topsoil, which will be partly re-used on site and partly re-used on nearby agricultural land. In this context, the applicant is requested to take into consideration the provisions of the *Fertile Soil (Preservation) Act* and consult with ERA and the Director of Agriculture for further instructions on soil management.

- 6.6 Re-utilisation of waste as Type 1 unbound (filling/levelling) material or for any other use as deemed appropriate is being encouraged. Any inert waste generated during excavation processes that is not deemed suitable for re-use, is to be disposed in facilities that are licensed to accept or recycle this waste, duly permitted by ERA and in accordance with the Waste Management Regulations (S.L. 549.63) and Waste Management (Activity Registration) Regulations (S.L. 549.45). The PDS also states that there shall be no increase of waste from the proposed operations.
- 6.7 Given that the site falls within the groundwater safeguard zone, all discharges should be adequately contained by the appropriate waste management infrastructure (e.g. oil-water separators, water channels and catchment areas). Moreover, storm-water drainpipes should be installed and connected to the existing network. The collected storm-water should be carried to reservoirs for second class use. Therefore, the appropriate mitigation measures are to be adhered to in order to limit the risks of contamination into the surrounding.

Cultural Heritage

- 6.8 In view that archaeological features or cultural assets may be uncovered, it is recommended that the applicant liaises with the Superintendence of Cultural Heritage for further guidance.

Air Quality, Noise & Vibration and Light Pollution

- 6.9 During the construction phase, dust generation is envisaged to cause temporary adverse impacts to the surrounding area. In this regard, as long as good site construction practices in accordance to the Environmental Management Construction Site Regulations (S.L. 552.09) are adhered to at all times, no significant impacts are envisaged.
- 6.10 From an operational point of view, the projected increase in air traffic is not significant in terms of air quality especially if an electric air fleet is to be introduced. Additionally, the site was in operation until 2006 within a facility approved for the use of aircraft operations. The PDS adds that vehicular traffic shall be mitigated by the provision of a park-and-ride facility.
- 6.11 No significant impacts are envisaged during the construction phase in view of the nature of the works. Any potential noise emissions and vibrations arising during construction are therefore likely to be minimal, short term and temporary. Construction works are to be in line with the Environmental Management Construction Site Regulations (S.L. 552.09). Moreover, the mitigation measures listed below are to be adhered to.
- All mechanical plant and construction equipment is to be silenced by best practical means including silencing measures such as compressor panels and mufflers should be properly maintained and utilised.
 - Noise enclosures should always have all doors or hatches closed when the equipment is in use.
 - Hoarding to be built around the site and maintained to maximise the reduction in noise levels to sensitive buildings.
 - Adequate management including timing of works (e.g. works during daytime hours only) and type of machinery used.
 - Avoid unnecessary noise, such as leaving noisy idle machinery operating.

- 6.12 The PDS under section 3 states that all flights will have noise abatement restrictions which will be detailed further by the competent authority for air operations. An extensive list of potential mitigation measures including a number of design and operational procedures which shall be adopted to ensure that noise and air quality emissions are minimised. Examples of which include, use of propeller and exhaust mufflers, no low-flying and engine run-ups in dedicated bays. In this regard, in order to confirm the effectiveness of the proposed mitigation measures, an operational noise impact study is being requested by ERA. The study shall be aimed at modelling noise emissions during operation i.e. aircraft movements specifically take-offs and landings; with and without the proposed mitigation measures.
- 6.13 No significant light pollution is envisaged in view that construction should be limited to daylight hours and the airfield will not be operational at night.

Visual Impact and Landscape Character

- 6.14 In view of the flat topography of the site, the proposal will only be visible from the immediate vicinity of the site. In this regard, no significant visual and landscape impacts on the surroundings are envisaged. The proposed landscaping at the periphery of the site is positive in environmental terms.

7. Screening in terms of the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations, S.L. 549.44

- 7.1 As mentioned in Section 4.2 above, the proposal lies in the vicinity of four Natura 2000 sites; two terrestrial protected sites and two marine protected areas.
- 7.2 The protected cliffs at Ta' Ċenċ as well as the marine protected area which are designated as SPAs, offer an ideal habitat for three species of sea-bird populations, Yelkouan Shearwater, *Puffinus yelkouan* (Annex I, Birds Directive), Mediterranean Storm Petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus* and Scopoli's Shearwater, *Calonectris diomedea* (Annex I, Birds Directive). The biggest colony of Scopoli's Shearwater, *C. diomedea* in Gozo is at Ta' Ċenċ Cliffs. Moreover, Mgarr ix-Xini valley, which is a designated AEI and is important as a feeding and resting place for migratory and wintering bird species. It is unclear whether the proposal will have an impact on the protected bird species and hence affect the integrity and management plans of the protected areas with regards to noise and vibrations.
- 7.3 In this regard, further assessment is required through the submission of an Appropriate Assessment (AA) study.

III. ERA CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDED WAY FORWARD

Environmental Impact Assessment, S.L. 549.46

The above detailed EIA screening concludes that impacts of the development are unlikely to be significant to the point of warranting an EIA in accordance with the EIA Regulations (S.L. 549.46), as long as the various preventive mitigation measures listed hereunder are adhered to:

- i. Minimising the need for excavations and reusing as much of the excavated material as possible;
- ii. Careful consideration should be given to the design especially of the boundary walls to minimise the impact of the proposal on the rural landscape character and on visual amenity;
- iii. Ensuring the availability of adequate onsite parking for participants, charging facilities for electric cars and airplanes, park-and-ride services and provision of bicycle racks as well as other facilities that allow/promote alternative modes of transport to alleviate traffic. These should be included within the committed site; and
- iv. Ensuring the adoption of best practice environmental measures throughout the construction phase, including measures for mitigating noise, vibration, and dust impacts as well as managing surface water, and the putting in place of appropriate operational monitoring regimes. Also, ensuring compliance with waste management regulations during operation.

With respect to points ii and iii above, revised plans/submissions are required.

In addition to the above and as already mentioned in the screening carried out in Section 6, further assessment on the impacts from noise emissions and vibrations during operation is required.

Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Protection Regulations, S.L. 549.44

In view of the aforementioned impacts outlined in Section 7 and the possibility of these having an effect on the integrity of the species and habitats listed as Natura 2000, an AA is required. The further processing of this development proposal shall await the outcome of the AA in accordance with the Flora, Fauna and Natural Habitats Regulations (S.L. 549.44).

Screening Disclaimer

The above screening results, the ensuing conclusions and recommendations are without prejudice to any required changes or updates should the development proposal be eventually modified or should the information/assumptions provided turn out to be incorrect. Any deviations of the proposal from this submission would need to be re-assessed and the merits of this screening would need to be re-opened.