

Cannon: Flyovers no 'significant' impact

Air Force issues environment assessment

by **Chandra Johnson**

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Cannon Air Force Base issued the first draft of its environmental assessment for its proposed low-altitude training flights, saying that it found no "significant" environmental impacts for the areas of New Mexico and Colorado earmarked as training locales.

The 214-page document published on Cannon's website comes almost exactly a year since the base first announced its intention to conduct an estimated three flights a day to train pilots of tilt-rotor MC-130J and CV-22 aircraft (commonly called "Hercules" and "Osprey" aircraft, respectively). Many of the trainings would occur at night.

Carol Miller, an organizer from Taos' Peaceful Skies Coalition, said the finding was proof that the decision was made to put the training program in New Mexico skies.

"How is it possible that the Air Force did not find one single problem?" Miller said in an email. "That is impossible and shows what a sham and mockery the [National Environmental Protection Agency] process has become."

Among the concerns raised by Taos-ers in the past year, the draft addressed airspace management, noise, safety and air quality — saying that none of the issues would be impacted enough to stop the proposed missions.

With the draft published, Cannon will again open a 60-day public comment period that will include local visits to areas within the training area. Cannon said comments will be included in the final draft of the assessment.

As far as noise goes, the draft said that a flight configuration for both types of aircraft were staged in a computer model for study, and that the analysis used "twice the average flight activity" expected for the missions and that the computer model "yields noise estimates that are higher than the noise levels anticipated to occur during most low altitude training flights."

From the computer model, the noise levels were mathematically calculated, the draft said, at less than 35 decibels. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency identifies levels exceeding 55 decibels as the standard to require an assessment for the affect on public welfare. Even at a training altitude of 500-1,00 feet, Cannon contends few people would be disturbed by the noise, especially since the proposed area is several thousand square miles.

“The average number of times per year that a person sleeping would be awakened by an overflight was calculated based on the frequency of late-night noise events with the strongest potential to awaken sleepers,” the draft reads. “Persons in a residence at any given location under the proposed training area and outside an avoidance area, assuming twice the average flying activity, could be awakened once per year, on average, if windows were open and once per two years if windows were closed.”

The draft emphasized that “mission planning would make sure that flights were dispersed so that the same location was not overflown more than once per day.”

On the subject of safety, the draft stated that aircraft would likely not “dump fuel” over any given area — unless there was an emergency.

“If an emergency requiring a fuel dump were to occur, the aircraft would climb to an altitude greater than 2,000 feet above the highest obstacle within five miles prior to initiating the dump,” the draft reads. “At this altitude, the vast majority of dumped fuel would vaporize prior to reaching the ground.”

The draft also claimed that by EPA standards, the air pollution emitted during trainings would have a “less than significant impact.”

“The pollutant with the greatest emissions in the proposed training area, Nitrogen Oxide, would be approximately 42 tons per year, which is well below the applicable Prevention of Significant Deterioration (PSD) threshold of 250 tons per year,” the draft reads.

Nitrogen Oxide, according to a study on the impacts of the substance published by the EPA, eventually forms nitric oxide, a compound that is produced during combustion found during lightning or in an engine. Over time, nitric acid can bond with atmospheric moisture, causing acid rain.

Finally, the draft addressed Taos’ concerns that potential vibrations from the flights could pose structural damage to the ancient buildings at Taos Pueblo.

The studies conducted to determine the “aircraft noise induced vibration” compared structures at the Pueblo to those of the Long House Anasazi site dating to the year 1300 A.D. The numbers for that study came from B-52 overflight at 590 feet, which was still “below the threshold value by a factor of approximately five.”

“The proposed flights would not be expected to result in induced vibrations with potential to damage ancient stone structures,” the draft said.

Even if the numbers are below the government standards, that doesn’t make the trainings OK, Miller said, and it is testing her faith in the EPA.

“(The National Environmental Protection Agency) is a servant of the military not the savior of the environment it was designed to be when enacted,” Miller said.

When the coalition holds its public meeting Sept. 15, she said the Air Force is in for an earful.

“I believe the Air Force will hear loud and clear that the public is not going to take this obscene decision lightly. We are going to hold our elected “representatives” accountable for their funding of this wasteful, unethical and environmentally dangerous plan,” Miller said. “New Mexico wants to remain the land of enchantment, not become New Mexistan with intrusive flying and spying over our heads every night.”

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