



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## Air Force plans low-altitude flights

**By Chandra Johnson**

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Cannon Air Force Base gave public notice this week that it plans to perform an “environmental assessment” for future low-altitude aircraft training in Northern New Mexico and southern Colorado — and it wants public feedback.

In the notice published in *The Taos News*, the air force states that it selected the area “due to the lack of large civilian populations, proximity to Cannon Air Force Base and varied topography and weather which provide realistic training for various types of ... Osprey aircrews.”

While the notice expressly states that pilots must avoid towns, wilderness, noise-sensitive and other specific areas, the plan is to conduct about three low-altitude tactical navigation (LATN) trainings each day or nearly 700 flights a year.

One concern raised is that the notice said nothing of avoiding Taos Pueblo airspace. The Taos Pueblo governor and war chief’s office said that tribal government was in a council meeting Wednesday (Sept. 8) and was unavailable for comment on the matter.

A copy of the written proposal includes a map of the proposed airspace, which spans as far west as the Four Corners area, as far south as New Mexico’s Roosevelt County, as far north as Colorado’s Garfield County and as far east as the Texas state border.

What would the training mean? Very low-flying night flights, the air force says.

“The majority of the training flights would take place after dusk with 95 percent taking place Monday through Friday,” the proposal reads. “Aircraft would fly as low as 200 feet above ground level.”

The proposal also includes alter natives for the public to favor should they contact the Air Force with their concerns. Alter native 1 would make the LATN training area slightly smaller, but the air force warns that this alternative would mean a “reduction in the available training area which increases the likelihood that crews would fly the same route multiple times a day and that inclement weather could preclude training.”

The other option, call the “No-Action Alternative,” would mean using existing military training routes. The Air Force proposal stated that the routes are “heavily used” already and that such limits could hinder pilot training.

A search of *The Taos News*’ archives revealed that in 1992, B1 bomber jets originating from Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma had two major training air paths over Taos County, worrying and annoyina some San Cristòbal residents.

After much letter writing and public outcry, Sen. Jeff Bingaman came out against the flights and questioned the Air Force's choice of Northern New Mexico for its training flights. In January 2000, the Air Force made a preliminary announcement that there would be no new low-level bomber training flights over the region.

This time, the training flights would be for various types of Osprey aircraft — a variety of tilt-rotor propeller craft that serve as helicopters or planes — not jets.

Detractors are against the proposal for many reasons. One such detractor is Taoseno Harold Timber. "It wrecks the peace, the tranquility, the wildlife. It's noisy, it puts more noxious fumes in the air," Timber said. "If people react, we can maybe change their minds."

Timber and other objectors to the Air Force's proposals say that writing to the Air Force to voice concerns is not enough.

"We also need to write to our congressmen," Timber said.

*The Taos News* asked Sen. Bingaman's office if the senator planned to become as involved to prevent the flyovers as he was the last time. Bingaman's office said the senator urged Taosenos to speak up.

"Sen. Bingaman recognizes the concerns of communities like Taos and Taos Pueblo. Unlike in the 1990s, when the Air Force tried to impose a plan on New Mexico, this time they appear to be reaching out to gain an understanding of potential problems and concerns," Maria Najera with Bingaman's office said. "We urge the public and officials from Taos and others areas to express their concerns, as Sen. Bingaman will, and work to ensure minimal impact on communities, pueblos and sensitive areas."

Timber and others who want quiet skies are hoping Taos will hear the call and make noise on the issue.

"I really resent the idea of something flying 200 feet over our heads," Timber said. "We don't need something that invasive."



**Osprey air vehicles like the one shown above will train over Northern New Mexico and southern Colorado.**

U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Airman Andy M. Kin