

Air Force gets earful at flyover forum

By Chandra Johnson

The Taos News, (1/22/2011)

More than 100 people packed the Kachina Lodge Conference Room, Tuesday night (Sept. 20) to offer their two cents about Cannon Air Force Base's proposed low-altitude training.

The forum is part of a 60-day public comment period ending Nov. 5 that comes on the heels of Cannon's draft environmental assessment.

The document is meant to be an initial draft of potential environmental impacts the proposed three flights per night could have over the 60,700square-mile-area covering Northern New Mexico and southern Colorado.

Cannon's draft offered a "Finding of No Significant Impact" earlier this month for the potential pollution, noise damage and other factors over the area, to the outrage of many citizens and members of the Peaceful Skies Coalition.

Some 58 people signed up to give Cannon officials a piece of their minds, and at one point public affairs officer Lt. Stephanie Strine with the 27th Special Operations Wing was yelled-at and lunged-at for taking photos of audience members.

The objections to flyovers varied greatly from pollution concerns, noise damage to sensitive adobe structures, impacts on autistic children and veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, to objections to the federal government's defense budget.

Perhaps the biggest applause was reserved for Cliff Bain, founding member of the Peaceful Skies Coalition. Bain, like many other commenters, stressed the importance of a full-blown, detailed environmental impact statement.

Bain also towed the line that the training mission was part of a longtime plan hatched in the Richardson administration to keep Cannon open. "In 2005, when they were scrambling for a mission, they said, bring special ops to Cannon. I know they promised you our air space and our land and I'm sorry, but no one asked us," Bain said to a standing ovation. "Please don't insult our intelligence by telling us there is not impact on our already fragile economy and environment. Be prepared: If this goes forward, we will take you to court."

Many of the commenters also questioned the need for another training area, like Taosena Barbara Hatfield.

"With 800 bases around the world that we know of, you don't need to practice in my back yard," Hatfield said. "I wouldn't miss an opportunity to look you right in the eye and say, this is wrong."

Prior to the forum, Peaceful Skies leader Carol Miller sat down with *The Taos News* to clarify many of the problems she had with the draft, including the lack of hard copies made available to the public.

Miller argues that the Air Force's special operations being moved to Cannon is part of a shift in the American government's priorities placing defense over countless other necessities.

"There's so much air space that I feel like we're dealing with very spoiled children. This is so detrimental to the health of the last pristine area with the synchronicity of obscene use of funds in the air while I'm addressing the poverty every day here on the ground," Miller said. "This is part of something big that's leading to the economic collapse of the United States at some point. I feel like maybe this is what they were saying in the Soviet Union before the collapse, with so much money going toward defense."

Another problem, which was echoed throughout the night, is that Miller says the draft EA is not nearly specific enough to understand the potential environmental impacts on Northern New Mexico. What's really needed, she says, is an environmental impact statement (EIS).

"The only real health impact it talked about was noise," Miller said. "I've talked to ski crews in Sipapu who are at risk of being caught in an avalanche. I haven't seen any study done on the impact on snowpack. An EIS would require a much more specific breakdown of the gross averages that are in the draft EA."

EIS still a possibility

But Cannon officials say that an EIS isn't out of the question. Strine said that following the public comment period ending Nov. 5, one of three things could happen.

"If the final EA doesn't result in a FONSI (Finding of No Significant Impact), we'll either go through a study resulting in an EIS or we'll go with a no action alternative," Strine said.

The draft issued findings that were largely based on simulations and field experiments performed through government contracts with organizations like Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), Cannon said in an email to *The Taos News*.

That's how Cannon came up with their data and numbers for things like aircraft "mishap" rates and how many people could potentially be awakened in the event of a flyover.

"Based on historical data on mishaps at all installations, and under all conditions of flight, the military services calculate mishap rates per 100,000 flying hours for each type of aircraft in the inventory," Strine wrote. "Based on the flying hours and accident rates for the different major aircraft types that will routinely fly within the training airspace, these mishap rates are used to compute a projection of the estimated years between Class A mishaps."

"Class A mishaps," Strine clarified, means loss of life, permanent disability, a total cost of more than \$2 million or destruction of aircraft.

The no-action alternative would mean that the training air crews would use existing training routes and corridors. The potential problem, Strine and Col. Kirk Smith told the crowd, is that using existing training areas elsewhere would mean that pilots would be training over the same terrain repeatedly, essentially taking strategy and challenge out of the exercise.

A larger area like the one proposed, Cannon argues, would mean better training and less destruction over any given area. "A smaller geographic area means a more concentrated impact," Strine said. "The larger the area, the less concentrated the impact will be."

Strine said that the main thing for the public to remember is that the process is not finished and public comment is still a crucial part of that process.

"We have a commitment to the men and women who fly to train them properly because they have a commitment to keep Americans safe," Strine said. "It's only fair to them to send them prepared."



A paper plane rests in the middle of the aisle during Tuesday night's (Sept. 20) community forum at the Kachina Lodge about the Air Force's plan for low-altitude training.

Tina Larkin