



THE TAOS NEWS

Named Best U.S. Weekly Newspaper by the Nat'l. Newspaper Assoc. 2007, 2008
Inland Press Foundation Nation's Best Weekly Newspaper 2009

EDITORIAL

Low-altitude flights: Why start training here?

The U.S. Air Force is proposing to have low-altitude aircraft training in the skies over Northern New Mexico and southern Colorado.

The Air Force also came up with this idea during the '90s, and after much local resistance, it moved its B-1 bomber-training mission to Texas in 2000.

For those who went through this the first time, their reaction has been, "Here we go again."

In this latest proposal, Cannon Air Force Base wants to send Osprey aircrews through our air space, claiming that it would be appropriate since this isn't a very populated area, and the lay of the land and weather would provide realistic training for pilots. Ospreys, a variety of tilt-rotor propeller craft that serve either as helicopters or planes, could fly as close as 200 feet to the ground.

The training area would extend west to the Four Corners area, east to the Texas border, north to Colorado's Garfield County and south to New Mexico's Roosevelt County.

The Air Force says the majority of training flights would take place after dusk, mostly on weekdays. About three low-altitude tactical navigation (LATN) flights would be conducted each day, or about 700 a year.

Pilots are supposed to avoid towns, wilderness, noise-sensitive and other specified areas. And, that's where we pause. That collection of areas seems to sum up Taos County.

Just what assurances would we have that the Air Force would avoid those areas? Just last month, some cowboy pilot buzzed Taos in a low-flying military aircraft. We have the photo to prove it.

The Air Force has two alternatives to Plan A. One would create a smaller training area, but it would still put Taos County smack dab in the middle.

The other is the so-called no-action proposal that would use existing military air routes. That is the option that would make the most sense if the Air Force is hell-bent on training here.

Yes, we want skilled military pilots, but why start training here?

So far, a group of activists calling themselves the Peaceful Skies Coalition is trying to get people's attention about this proposal by the Air Force. Good for them.

We also hope that the leadership of Taos Pueblo, which just celebrated the 40th anniversary of Blue Lake's return, will step forward as well to help protect the tribe's traditional way of life.

Cannon Air Force Base gave the general public about six weeks to comment — until Oct. 4 — as part of its environmental assessment. So far, Cannon hasn't planned any hearings.

So how do we get involved? The Peaceful Skies Coalition and the town of Taos are holding a public forum Monday (Sept. 27), 6:30 p.m. at Don Fernando Hall, 220 Civic Plaza Drive.

And there is still time to submit comments to Cannon Air Force Base. Call (575) 784-4131 or e-mail 27SOWpublicaffairs@cannon.af.mil.

We suggest writing our congressmen as well. Their contact information is provided below.

Now is the time to say your piece about low-flying aircraft over Taos.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N.M.

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