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Air Force deals with Taos distrust, questions at meeting

By Chandra Johnson

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Cannon Air Force Base officials tried to assuage Taos' concerns and offer a few answers over its proposed low-altitude training flights Thursday night (Oct. 14) at its public meeting in Río Grande Hall and also stressed the importance of military training.

Cannon's Col. Stephen Clark was present to answer Taoseños' burning questions about the trainings, which were announced last month.

"Our seriousness in this matter is driven by where I've had to write letters to mothers telling them their kids aren't coming home. That doesn't mean you should give us whatever we want. What I'm saying is we take it as seriously as you all do," Clark said.

The training area, which encompasses some 94,000 square miles of New Mexico and southern Colorado, would provide topographical similarities to combat areas overseas for pilots being trained on C-130 Hercules and CV-22 Osprey aircraft.

Cannon also says within that area, the pilots would fly low and mostly at night, in order to be prepared for special operations that require avoiding detection. With an area that large, Clark says, people would probably notice planes about 1 percent of the time.

The public comment period, which has been extended to Nov. 15, is one step in Cannon's "environmental assessment" of the area, which will determine how suitable the area is for such flights.

"In special operations, that is our task," Clark told a crowd of some 200 people. "We fly at night and in the weather. That's what distinguishes us from others."

Clark also said these scoping meetings and the public's input was crucial to give Cannon a good idea of what else to avoid besides towns, cities and noise-sensitive areas, as the FAA requires.

"Would we fly over the town of Taos? No," Clark said, in a refrain he would repeat several times in the evening. "One of the things we're here to find out is how far out do you extend? Then we can ask ourselves, how do we avoid it?"

Once the floor was opened for public comment, many expressed concern about pollution the flights might cause.

"What the Air Force proposes is the air equivalent of the Gulf oil spill," Laura Collins said. "I don't want to live in an environmental disaster. Is this how you're going to treat a national treasure?"

But Clark argued that the Air Force has been investing in cleaner fuels and alternative energies.

"It's not business as usual. We are already experimenting with biofuels. We are making efforts," Clark said.

Others were concerned about the possible effect of vibrations from flights on adobe buildings.

"Are we going to be compensated for damage to our way of life?" Margarita Denevan asked. "Or are we going to be collateral damage?"

Still others spoke of their general distrust of the military, as Sue Morgan did.

"I'm a skeptic. When we talk about the health of the people of Taos, I don't trust the Air Force to care," Morgan said to applause. "When it comes to the safety of the people of Taos, I don't trust the organization of the Air Force to care."

Taos resident Mark Asmus also spoke of his distrust.

"I have no credibility over you, Col. Clark, other than my age. I'm 67 years old, and in those 67 years, the military has succeeded in taking away what trust I had in them when I was young," Asmus said. "As the only child of a B-17 crewman killed in WWII, I'm very saddened to say that. Nothing you can say will persuade me otherwise, nor do I understand why you insist on pushing this proposal forward when it's so clear that the overwhelming majority is opposed to it."

Clark, who has served in special operations for 18 years and was present in the Pentagon, during 9/11, answered distrust by stressing the necessity of the best training for soliders and pilots.

"I have seen firsthand where we've been successful because of good training and I've seen where we've been not so good," Clark said. "You don't know what you'll face in combat."