

Cannon to delay final assessment for low altitude training flights

By Chandra Johnson

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Officials in Washington, D.C., have reported that Cannon Air Force Base is taking a step back from its proposed low-altitude training amid the end of the war in Afghanistan.

While Cannon has not yet made any official announcement about the future of its proposed 60,000-square-mile training area, Jude McCartin, press secretary for Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-NM, confirmed that Cannon's needs have evolved since the training was first suggested in 2010.

"The military is considering its future needs," McCartin said Monday (June 4). "They're trying to figure out, post-Afghanistan, what their low-altitude training needs will be."

The Taos News contacted Cannon's 1st Lt. Stephanie Schonberger, who said via email that the air force is "carefully analyzing Cannon's flying training requirements, including our low altitude training requirements, to determine what environmental analysis is needed moving forward."

Last September, Cannon released its first draft of its initial environmental assessment, which concluded that the estimated three flights per night would have no "significant" impact on the environment, including air quality, for the area that covers Northern New Mexico and southern Colorado.

The proposal was met with widespread criticism in Taos, culminating with two public comment forums in Taos where Cannon officials emphasized an ongoing process amid a wave of local backlash.

But none of this means Cannon's proposal is going anywhere.

With the changes and also the sheer volume of comments to consider, however, McCartin says it's likely Cannon won't get to a final environmental assessment, if one is still needed, until 2013.

Carol Miller, organizer of Taos County-based group the Peaceful Skies Coalition, said no one opposing the training is celebrating yet.

"We're still trying to figure out if this is part of something distressing," Miller said. "What our lawyer is telling us is that the draft [environmental assessment] can stay a draft forever and anytime they want to make it final, they can."

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