

Public input soon on Luke Air Force Base bid for F-35

by **Cecilia Chan** - Nov. 6, 2009
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The Air Force could begin soliciting public input as early as next month on Luke Air Force Base's potential for housing the new F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

The Glendale base is one of five military installations on a recently released short list to train pilots on the next generation of fighter-bombers. The Air Force also released six candidates for an operations base.

"The Environmental impact statement will probably start in a month or two and along with that the public scoping sessions," said Peoria Mayor Bob Barrett. "There will be at least three sessions in the Valley."

Barrett and Arizona Attorney Terry Goddard met with Pentagon officials earlier this week to discuss Luke.

"It seems to be a faster timeline than I thought," Goddard said Thursday. "I thought the EIS would be two to three years away. Now we are expected to have a draft by the spring. By the end of next year, we may have a decision."

Luke supporters see the F-35 as vital to keeping the base alive as a \$2 billion-a-year economic engine as its fleet of F-16s is phased out. Luke Forward, a statewide campaign to bring the new jet to Arizona, was launched in October.

Goddard and Barrett's meetings covered a number of topics, including the jet's noise, air quality and concerns expressed by El Mirage, which lies beneath Luke flight paths.

Goddard said major criteria used during the assessment of the bases will include cost and environmental concerns, such as residential impact. Luke has advantages in both, Goddard said, in that it has existing infrastructure and laws are in place to protect the base against encroachment.

Goddard and Barrett also seemed to have satisfied Air Force officials' concerns with Maricopa County air quality standards, such as particulates.

"The F-35 is not a dust generator," Goddard said. "It's a lot of things, but it's not a dust generator."

The pair also brought up a Maricopa Association of Governments study that concluded that if the F-35 were to come to Luke, there would be no adverse affect on the county's ability to meet federal air-quality compliance.

Goddard said Lt. Gen. Philip M. Breedlove, the No. 3 official at the Pentagon, briefed the group on the respective strengths of the bases on the short list. He said Breedlove, a former Luke wing commander, indicated Luke is a strong contender.

"Put it clearly, (he said,) 'You got a good thing right now, don't screw it up,' " Goddard said. "He thought very highly of many of Luke's assets.

The base's access to the Barry M. Goldwater Range and Airfield No. 1, known as Aux-1, also were cited as Luke's strengths.

Barrett also asked about the jet's noise.

"The feeling from them was most likely the noise would be in the same range as the F-15 and F-18," Barrett said. "I didn't get any feelings from them that noise was a problem."

Air Force officials said that for the environmental impact statement, they will do a modeling of noise data from an F-35 study it conducted in 2008 at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., Barrett said.

Luke is the country's largest training base for pilots on the F-16, which is considered less noisy than the F-15.

Barrett and Goddard said the Air Force indicated that adjustments can be made with the F-35's takeoffs and landings to reduce noise impacts.

El Mirage has asked the Air Force to bring the F-35 to Luke to do noise testing during the environmental assessment. The city says it has carried most of the burden of protecting Luke from encroachment to the detriment of its tax base. El Mirage officials have asked for relief from zoning restrictions imposed on two-thirds of the city.

Although some think El Mirage could undercut Luke's chances of getting the F-35, both Barrett and Goddard said that wasn't the impression they got from the Pentagon.

"They sort of indicated the more serious threat to the future of Luke was the incursion of residential (development)," Goddard said.