

Vt. Air Guard hopes for jet, but others fear noise

WILSON RING Associated Press

SOUTH BURLINGTON, Vt. (AP) -- Plans on where to base the U.S. military's next-generation fighter jet, the F-35, concern people in communities from California to Florida to Maine who worry the aircraft are too loud.

In Vermont, where the Air National Guard has flown planes from Burlington International Airport for more than 60 years, opponents are especially vocal. But in other communities, even some long accustomed to the roar of military aircraft, the noise of the F-35 has been an issue.

South Burlington City Council President Rosanne Greco, a retired Air Force officer, said she favored bringing the F-35 to her community until she read the draft environmental impact statement released last spring.

The F-35s "will have incredibly significant negative impact on up to 10,000 people who will be unfortunate enough to be in the noise contour zone that the federal government deems unsuitable for residential use," Greco said. "For me it's become a clear-cut analytical choice. The facts say this is harmful to our environment."

The report, she said, considers exposure to average aircraft noise greater than 65 decibels (about the sound of a vacuum cleaner about three feet away) "not considered suitable for residential use." Another section discusses the potential long-term health impacts of exposure to aircraft noise.

The plane's supporters say Greco is exaggerating the number of people who would be affected by the noise contour zone. And they believe she and others are cherry-picking information from the report without providing its full context. There is a section of the report that discusses long-term health effects, for example, but it concludes there aren't any significant health impacts.

The Air Force already has chosen where it will base the F-35s, also known as the Joint Strike Fighter, for training. The next step is to decide where to base the first operational planes, those that would be ready for war.

"Vermont is the most vocal, but Vermont is the preferred alternative for the Guard unit," Air Force spokeswoman Ann Stefanek said. "But it's not the only alternative."

Plans are to base 18 to 24 of the new aircraft in South Burlington by 2020. The military's final decision on the first round of operational bases is expected next spring.

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How much louder the planes are than other aircraft is debatable. Opponents cite Air Force charts indicating the F-35 can be at least twice as loud as the F-16 now flown out of Vermont. Others say that's an unfair comparison because measuring sound involves everything from how the planes are flown to weather conditions, the time of day and how long people are exposed.

F-35 supporters in Vermont say the opponents - who have a Facebook page and a separate website - are a small group of activists who number maybe 300. The city of South Burlington, home to the airport, opposes the planes, mostly because of the noise.

Gov. Peter Shumlin and the state's congressional delegation favor bringing the F-35 to Vermont. There are three pro-F-35 Facebook pages and one business group has collected almost 11,000 signatures in support.

If the 18-plane option for Vermont is chosen, considered most likely, the F-35 isn't expected to bring new jobs to the area but it would guarantee about 1,100 well-paying jobs already here. Six additional planes would add about 250 more jobs.

If the Vermont Guard isn't chosen, Col. David Baczewski, commander of the Vermont Guard's 158th fighter wing and a veteran F-16 pilot, said there would be no immediate impact on the current F-16 operations in Burlington.

He said he worries that if the Department of Defense orders another round of base closings, Vermont could be forced to compete against other guard units to keep its role as a front-line fighter base.

"I'd rather separate myself from the pack, be the leading-edge, top fighter wing that we are (and) get named (to fly) the F-35 right off the bat and secure the future," Baczewski said.

Noise concerns have followed the F-35 since it first began flying. Pegged at about \$130 million each for the Air Force version, it is the military's most expensive procurement program ever. The F-35 is designed to be the nation's supersonic and most advanced fighter through mid-century, with different models for the Air Force, Navy and Marines.

Despite its cost and noise concerns, there is no other alternative as the plane, nicknamed the Lightning II, is intended to replace fighter planes mostly designed in the 1970s.

In California, the Marine Corps Air Station Miramar is slated to get F-35s in several years, but environmental groups have already questioned the potential impact on endangered species. Neighbors have said they don't want the plane rattling their windows.

Noise concerns also have been raised in Arizona, where the Marines and Air Force are basing F-35s in Yuma and Phoenix, about 185 apart.

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In Florida's Panhandle, an area long-accustomed to the sounds of military aircraft, a lawsuit by the city of Valparaiso in part over noise concerns prompted the Air Force to change the Eglin Air Force Base runways the F-35s would use, in most instances, to avoid flying over the city.

Air Force and Marine pilots at Eglin began F-35 training missions last March. Since then F-35 pilots have flown about 600 sorties, with about 2 percent generating noise complaints, a number the base considers small.

Some of the complaints come on days the F-35s are not flying, said base spokesman Mike Spaits.

"We empathize with their plight, but the reality is there does seem to be some level of hysteria involved with the noise complaints on the F-35," he said.

Maine is home to one of the Northeast's largest aerial training areas, the 4,000-square-mile Military Operation Area Condor, which extends into northern New Hampshire. Concerns about the noise of the F-35 play into long-running mistrust among some in Maine about low-level military training flights.

Current plans call for the F-35 to be operated above 7,000 feet over Maine, but there are special low-level corridors.

Some Maine residents seem resigned to the prospect that the louder F-35s will be operating over Maine, said Tom Mauzaka, a retired Air Force colonel, who lives in the western Maine town of Strong.

"This plane is loud," said Mauzaka. "It would be loud at 7,000 feet."

Little, if any, opposition has come from the other two Air Guard bases seen as suitable for operating the F-35s, Jacksonville, Fla., Air National Guard base and McEntire Joint National Guard Base in Eastover, S.C. But in another area of South Carolina, plans to base the F-35 at the Marine Corps Air Station in Beaufort have brought complaints about potential noise.

Back in Vermont, Winooski Mayor Michael O'Brien, whose city is about a mile from the north end of the runway, traveled to Eglin Air Force Base last month with Shumlin and other officials to listen to the F-16 and F-35 fly over, one after another.

Winooski opposes basing the F-35 at the South Burlington airport if the planes are significantly louder than the F-16s. O'Brien said he was at one end of an Eglin runway while the different planes went over in a number of different configurations.

"They are both loud, but it was hard to really get a handle on just how much louder," O'Brien said. "It didn't blow my socks off, the difference."

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