



Published on HamptonRoads.com | PilotOnline.com (<http://hamptonroads.com>)

Navy drops contested N.C. site for practice field

WASHINGTON

The Navy on Tuesday abandoned its controversial plan to build a practice landing strip in Washington County, N.C., for its fighter jets and said it will launch a fresh study of five other sites - three in Virginia and two in North Carolina - for the \$250 million project.

The decision by Navy Secretary Donald Winter was a stunning victory for a coalition of farmers and environmentalists who have fought the proposed outlying landing field for more than three years. It sets the stage for a new struggle between the service and residents and officials of the counties now under consideration.

The Navy's written announcement gave no explanation for the decision, saying only that the service had received new information from the two states about alternative sites. Environmental and other reviews are expected to take about 30 months.

The service already has spent more than \$25 million on previous environmental studies and on land purchases in Washington County.

The new sites were among more than a dozen that had been under consideration. All are within 65 miles of Oceana Naval Air Station in Virginia Beach, the Navy's East Coast "master jet base."

The outlying field would serve as a training site for flight crews out of Norfolk and fighter pilots based at Oceana. Development around the Fentress Naval Auxiliary Landing Field in Chesapeake makes it difficult to simulate the night landings that pilots must conduct on aircraft carriers at sea. Navy officials have said pilots would keep using Fentress, though not as extensively as they do now, if a new field is built.

State officials and members of the Virginia congressional delegation said the latest site selections underscore the Navy's commitment to remaining at Oceana, which nearly was closed by a federal commission in 2005. The state and federal governments may be able to offer financial incentives that will make the outlying field more appealing to nearby residents, they suggested.

But officials in Surry, Sussex and Southampton counties, where the Virginia sites are located, already have announced their opposition, and residents said Tuesday that the field would disrupt a treasured way of life.

"When people have moved here from the Peninsula or one of the cities nearby, they believe the quietness of the area will be compromised by the jet noise," said Surry County Administrator Tyrone Franklin.

"The area is rolling farmland. It's quiet, with large-acre properties, open space. That's what Surry is known for. Everything is spread out, and that's the way people who live here like it," he added.

"We don't want to see this on anyone's farm. We don't need it," said Felice Hancock, an anthropologist who lives on a farm near Berlin in Southampton County. A landing field near her home could threaten endangered wildlife such as the red-cockaded woodpecker, she said.

The Virginia sites are Cabin Point, in western Surry County; and Dory and Mason, both along the Sussex County-Southampton County line. All three are comprised mostly of forests and farmland. Each site has fewer than 500 people living in an area that would be significantly affected by jet noise, according to Navy estimates.

The North Carolina sites are Hale's Lake, near the Camden County-Currituck County line; and

Sandbanks, in Gates County. They also are sparsely populated but have somewhat more farmland and less forest than the Virginia locations.

"Based on my extensive discussions with officials and residents in Gates, Camden and Currituck counties, it is clear that the Navy's proposal... will be met with considerable resistance," said Sen. Elizabeth Dole, R-N.C. "It is my understanding that the Navy has yet to consult with local leaders in these three counties, which I find very discouraging."

Jeff Jennings, chairman of the Camden County Board of Commissioners, said, "I don't know what else to do but keep lobbying our politicians." He is a landowner in the Hale's Lake area.

In Richmond, Gov. Timothy M. Kaine issued a statement acknowledging that plans for the landing field cause "great concern among many in the potentially affected localities."

But Kaine also said the field is "critically important" to training Navy pilots and promised to work for a compromise between the Navy and residents.

"There's plenty of time to explore all possibilities," said Robert Crouch, the governor's deputy for commonwealth preparedness.

Crouch recalled that as part of the 2005 base closing round, the state agreed to provide half of a \$15 million annual fund to purchase property in high-risk areas around Oceana. He suggested that initiative could be a model for other aid to areas affected by the landing field.

Another possibility is a state-backed commercial development that would bring economic benefits to the locality selected as host.

The Hampton Roads Military and Federal Facilities Alliance and the Virginia Port Authority have drawn up an informal proposal to develop a cargo distribution center and industrial park near a new landing field.

U.S. Reps. Randy Forbes and Bobby Scott, whose districts include the new Virginia sites, urged the Navy to pay attention to residents' concerns. The state must honor promises that the landing field will not be forced on anyone, Forbes said, but it also should search for a way to accommodate residents and the Navy.

The Navy's moves Tuesday left Washington County residents savoring a victory.

The Washington County site's runway would have been within five miles of a national wildlife refuge where hundreds of thousands of birds stop each year as they migrate along the Atlantic Flyway.

Residents nearby formed a group called North Carolinians Opposed to the Outlying Landing Field, or No OLF. The band of farm families did everything from march in parades to lobby Congress against the proposed site, located more than 70 miles from Oceana.

Their cause was aided, indirectly, by environmental groups that cautioned the landing field would interfere with bird migration, and that the close proximity of tundra swans and snow geese could pose a lethal threat to pilots if they collided.

"I feel a little bit better, but they still own land down here," said Gerald Allen, a Washington County farmer who stood to lose 2,300 acres to the field. "You still don't know what they're going to do."

"They underestimated the people, they underestimated the ability of regular, ordinary, everyday people to band together in a common cause," said Dianne Layden of Belvidere, in Perquimans County.

Staff writers Jeff Hampton, Louis Hansen and Linda McNatt contributed to this report.

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Source URL (retrieved on 01/23/2008 - 11:14): <http://hamptonroads.com/2008/01/navy-drops-contested-nc-site-practice-field>