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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6050

September 8, 2011

RICHARD D. DeBOBES, STAFF DIRECTOR
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The Honorable Michael B. Donley
Secretary of the Air Force
3000 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-3000

Dear Secretary Donley:

I write to you today about an issue that could potentially have a negative impact on Air Force pilot training, military readiness and our overall national security. I want to be clear that this correspondence should in no way be viewed as me seeking preferential treatment for the State of Arizona. I expect only such action which is in the best interests of the country.

I am concerned about a wide range of issues related to the Air Force plan to transfer two F-16 training squadrons currently assigned to Luke AFB, Arizona, to Holloman AFB, New Mexico. As you know, the Air Force recently decided to delay these unit transfers by about 18 months to mid-2013 in order to reduce impacts to pilot production during a critical phase in the upcoming year. I believe the facts warrant further consideration of the plan.

The Air Force recently estimated that the military construction costs related to the transfer would be \$47 million to duplicate F-16 pilot training capacity at Holloman that already exists at Luke. I believe we have an obligation to be stewards of the taxpayer's money and seek savings wherever they can be realized. This planned transfer appears to run counter to this obligation.

I believe that Luke AFB and the Barry M. Goldwater Range (BMGR) have the capacity to support both the operations of the four U.S. F-16 training squadrons currently assigned to Luke, as well as multiple F-35 Lightning II squadrons. Both types of aircraft train primarily for air-to-ground missions. In fact, Luke has hosted far more F-16 training aircraft in the recent past—more than 200 F-16s on the flight line—than is currently envisioned even if the F-35 that replaces it is delivered on time and in the quantities called for under existing plans and the remaining F-16s at Luke are phased out slowly over time.

My staff has been told that the rationale for the F-16 transfer from Luke is at least partially supported by a desire of the Air Force to maintain air-to-ground training access to White Sands Missile Range from Holloman AFB, despite the fact that the Department of the Army has insisted as part of its formal range management agreement with the Air Force that White Sands will continue to be prioritized to support a robust schedule of Army and Joint missile testing. As a result, F-16 pilot training for squadrons transferred to Holloman AFB will be required to deconflict schedules around higher-priority Army and Joint missile tests, and in addition will also need to share airspace and bombing ranges with Army Apache helicopter

training based at Fort Bliss, foreign military training for the German Air Force, and dissimilar unmanned aerial vehicle pilot training from UAV units assigned to both Holloman AFB and Fort Bliss. Repeated studies by both the Air Force and Navy of competing uses at White Sands point to the potential for significant attrition of the airspace available for training student pilots, which could result in a negative impact on F-16 pilot production and slippage in the F-16 training pipeline.

Given these competing users and higher priority on testing at White Sands, will there be routine and predictable access to dedicated airspace and the air-to-ground range in order to provide the flexibility needed for a dynamic training syllabus? Delays, cancellation of planned flights, or shifting the training schedule due to emerging requirements often causes flight training preparation to have to be repeated from the beginning. First-priority for training range access exists at BMGR, while in contrast, it appears that the Air Force will have access to the White Sands range only during periods when pilot training operations do not conflict with a myriad of Army and Joint test activities.

As you know, based on the recent direction by the President to reduce the Defense budget by at least \$400 billion over the next twelve years, the Air Force is currently undergoing a thorough strategic review of all aspects of its budget and operations to find efficiencies and savings. At this critical point, I believe the Air Force can ill afford the costs involved in duplicating existing F-16 flight training infrastructure and capacity, adding unnecessary airspace and range challenges, and the potential for negative impacts on flight training productivity in order to preserve access to the White Sands range. Access by the Air Force to White Sands is already assured by a multi-service agreement, and to the extent the Air Force desires to exercise those rights from time-to-time, I believe it can do so most efficiently through rotational training. Given the competing priorities and users at White Sands, I do not believe that it is possible to duplicate the existing training capacity at the Barry M. Goldwater Range at the White Sands Missile Range.

I urge you to consider the proposed F-16 transfer in light of the significant additional costs associated with duplicating the infrastructure, the personnel and operation and maintenance costs associated with the move, the potential for negative training impact, including whether there will be negative impacts on pilot training production, the concerns raised about the shortage of available housing for transferred military and civilian personnel, and the potential for conflicts over access to the airspace and capacity for air-to-ground training at White Sands Missile Range. Additionally, I request that you also carefully weigh how looming Defense budget cuts will affect the F-35 program in terms of its planned delivery schedule and ultimate numbers of aircraft to be procured before deciding whether to go forward with, and the timing of, proposed transfers of F-16 from Luke AFB.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John McCain". The signature is stylized and cursive.

John McCain
Ranking Member