

December 23, 2014

The Honorable Deborah Lee James
Secretary of the Air Force
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, DC 20330-1670

Dear Secretary James,

As you move forward with the proposed expansion of the Powder River Training Complex (PRTC) airspace, it is critical the Air Force work diligently to fulfill the promises implicit in the mitigation strategy that was part of the final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) released on November, 28, 2014. The Air Force must take aggressive steps to ensure successful communication with impacted interest groups and to respond to their concerns. Additionally, there are several improvements needed to the mitigation strategy, and I request the Air Force address each of these.

The Air Force has taken important strides in answering many of the concerns raised about the PRTC expansion. However, in my opinion, the Air Force has not clearly communicated its overall mitigation strategy to impacted parties, and there are concerns the Air Force will not adhere to its promises. If the Air Force falls short of its promises, businesses and livelihoods throughout the four impacted states will be negatively impacted. As such, the Air Force needs to take aggressive action to remedy this challenge.

As the time when the Air Force can issue its Record of Decision nears, there are several areas that need additional emphasis and attention as the Air Force considers how best to implement its mitigation strategy:

- Communication with aviation interests – A major concern of general aviators and airport officials is how best to communicate with the Air Force regarding PRTC operations. I understand that Ellsworth Air Force Base will lead efforts to coordinate PRTC operations and the Air Force will use an enhanced NOTAM process to get information to pilots, but every effort must be made so that it is easy for general aviation pilots and others to get information and schedules regarding PRTC activity. This includes the need for pilots to have a direct phone access to Ellsworth airspace operations for up-to-date information regarding PRTC usage. The Air Force should also consider installing a remote communications outlet to provide ground access throughout the region to key Air Traffic Control facilities. The first line of contact regarding PRTC information should not be the Public Affairs Office as that places an extra layer of bureaucracy between pilots and the information they need. Also, the overall communication strategy must include a plan for providing regional airports and state aviation officials sufficient information so they can provide basic direction when contacted regarding PRTC.

- Non-emergency medical flights – A critical part of the mitigation strategy is the development of a recall ability so Air Force planes can quickly exit a region for medical emergency flights. I appreciate your efforts on this front; however, it should be noted that several medical facilities in the region fly in doctors on a regular basis. It is critical the Air Force reach out to medical facilities throughout the four-state region and prioritize these transport flights to ensure access to care is not negatively impacted.
- Memos of Understanding – I also appreciate the Air Force’s willingness to enter into Memos of Understanding (MOUs) with regional businesses that use airspace. Such an effort will go a long way toward protecting this region’s economy and developing good relationships with the Air Force. However, it is critical the Air Force understand that all such MOUs must have significant flexibility to allow businesses to adapt to changing situations. For example, quickly changing weather impacts a wide number of regional businesses from crop dusting to weather modification, and the Air Force must keep the flexibility such businesses require in mind when negotiating MOUs.
- Bowman Airport – A critical situation in my state is the new airport being built in Bowman that is slated to open in 2015. The new airport will bring changes to aviation operations and schedules throughout southwestern North Dakota. The Air Force needs to aggressively reach out to airport officials to understand the airport expansion plans and impact. The Air Force also must understand that the new Bowman Airport will evolve over time with changes to schedules and increases in the number of flights over the coming years. The PRTC mitigation strategy must provide the flexibility to handle such changes and make arrangements to not limit the growth potential of the airport.

I look forward to learning more about how you intend to meet these challenges as you develop the Air Force’s mitigation implementation strategy. It is critical that the Air Force, the Federal Aviation Administration, and all impacted stakeholders continue to work closely together to ensure questions are answered and businesses protected.

Sincerely,



Heidi Heitkamp
U.S. Senator

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