

Brewer: F-35s will save base, economy

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Published On: Thursday, October 15, 2009, StatePress.com

Gov. Jan Brewer announced a new campaign to request a fleet of new fighter jets for Luke Air Force Base at a press conference Wednesday morning.

The campaign, known as “Luke Forward,” is aimed at convincing the Department of Defense to allocate a group of F-35 fighter planes, which is expected to replace the F-16s currently used at Luke.

The Air Force unveiled plans in April to purchase more than 500 F-35s over the next five years as a replacement for the F-16. Currently, Luke Air Force Base is a training site for F-16 pilots, which means the base could be in danger of closure if the fighters are discontinued.

That closure could spell disaster for the local economy, Brewer said, because the base generates billions of dollars in revenue.

“Given our state’s current economic condition, this stable, recession-proof industry needs to be maintained and strengthened,” Brewer said.

Charlie Freericks, chairman of the advocacy group Fighter Country Partnership, said the base brings in more than \$2 billion in revenue each year, which the state cannot afford to lose.

“As every other industry gets hammered by a national recession, our stable defense industry is becoming increasingly important,” he said.

The governor was joined by officials from the cities of Buckeye, Goodyear, Phoenix, Litchfield Park and Glendale, which is home to Luke Air Force Base.

Glendale Mayor Elaine Scruggs said a sunny climate and proximity to the 1.9 million-acre Barry M. Goldwater training range make the Phoenix area a logical choice as a training ground for F-35 pilots.

“Luke is perfectly positioned to receive the F-35 and continue its decades-long role as the Air Force’s premier training base for our country’s fighter pilots,” Scruggs said. “Our state has the ideal climate, land, air space and training ranges [for fighter-pilot training].”

Representatives from the neighboring city of El Mirage were noticeably absent from the press conference. El Mirage city officials have voiced concerns about the noise and environmental impacts of the new jets, which have not yet been evaluated by the Air Force.

Stacy Pearson, a spokeswoman for El Mirage, said the city is not trying to block acquisition of the new jets, but rather trying to get a good idea of how noisy F-35s are so it can take necessary precautions.

“We’re not asking anyone to close down the Air Force base or not to request the F-35s, we just want to see how loud they are,” Pearson said.

El Mirage is not the only city concerned with the noise generated by the F-35. The city of Valparaiso, Fla., filed a lawsuit against the Air Force this year, claiming Air Force officials have not responded to their Freedom of Information Act requests for data regarding the noise caused by the new fighter plane. A settlement reached by the two parties in July called for the Air Force to provide Valparaiso with the data.

John Rutherford, an aerospace systems design professor at the Ira A. Fulton School of Engineering, said he doesn’t believe the new aircraft would be noticeably louder than the F-16s currently used at Luke Air Force Base.

Although the F-35 has a larger engine and more thrust than the F-16, newer aircraft typically have more fuel-efficient engines, which means the increase in noise level would not be substantial, he said.

“You may be able to take instruments out there and make the case that they’re noisier, but I don’t think the average person is going to be able to tell the difference between the two,” Rutherford said.