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El Mirage considers suing Luke Air Force Base to limit noise

Phoenix Business Journal - by [Mike Sunnucks](#)

El Mirage is at the doorstep of **Luke Air Force Base**, and officials there say they may follow the lead of a Florida town that is suing the U.S. Air Force to limit the number of F-35 fighter jets based at nearby Eglin Air Force Base.

Community leaders say they're examining the lawsuit filed in federal court by the city of Valparaiso, Fla., over potential noise problems with the F-35s and how environmental- and community-impact studies were handled.

El Mirage Councilman Bill Conner said the West Valley suburb has been looking at the Valparaiso lawsuit and shares concerns that the F-35 joint strike fighter is substantially louder than the F-16, which it is replacing along with several other aircraft in the U.S. military arsenal.

Luke is the longtime home of F-16 training programs. With that jet being phased out, the Glendale base and its Valley boosters want to draw F-35 training there. They worry that Luke's days will be numbered if that does not happen.

El Mirage could be the fly in that ointment.

Officials also are concerned about how the Air Force will handle pending impact studies, and they say a huge increase in noise from Luke would hurt property values and economic development efforts. They say those who bought homes and other property in the West Valley had an expectation of noise and other impact from the F-16s, but they should know the F-35s are much louder.

"We're not ruling anything out," Conner said of the possible lawsuit.

El Mirage leaders have met with Valparaiso officials several times regarding its suit, filed in March.

"We have the same concerns they have," said Scott Chesney, El Mirage's economic development director.

Chesney and Conner said the F-35's noise levels could be two to five times louder than the F-16's, according to projections they have seen from Valparaiso. Impact studies regarding the F-35 at Luke are scheduled to start before the end of this year, and El Mirage is waiting to see how those processes work before deciding on legal action.

El Mirage officials have, however, requested F-35 information from their West Valley neighbors, including Glendale, and they wrote to U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates on Oct. 13 asking that F-35 jets be brought to Luke AFB to be flown and tested so ground noise levels can be determined.

Arizona State University economist Jay Butler said the noise concerns stem from Luke being so close to major metropolitan developments. He said that presents problems for the base's viability, which could lead to its downsizing or closure.

Luke has survived previous rounds of base closures, but the Pentagon is looking to close more facilities as it moves to smaller, high-tech forces. Luke, once located in farmland miles away from urban development, now is part of a major metro area. Concerns such as those raised by El Mirage could work against the base in decisions regarding where the F-35s are based, Butler said.


Talk of a potential lawsuit hurting Luke's future has earned the small suburb plenty of heat from Luke's boosters and other Valley cities. That includes Glendale, which thus far has prevailed over El Mirage in a separate legal battle concerning which of the two cities could annex unincorporated farmland near Luke and Loop 303.

The base has received its share of noise complaints in the past, and there have been lawsuits and political battles — including one pitting Maricopa County against the state and West Valley cities, with the county wanting to issue building permits for home and commercial construction near Luke.

Glendale Mayor Elaine Scruggs said any conjecture about an El Mirage lawsuit is premature because Luke has not yet learned what role it might play with the F-35 and impact studies have not yet been conducted, let alone questioned.

The mayor said she expects the Air Force to conduct impact studies according to federal laws and does not expect any basis for a lawsuit. The studies related to Luke and F-35s are expected to begin soon, but no start date or timetable has been announced by the Pentagon.

The Luke issue and the suburb's potential dissent on the F-35 front led El Mirage Mayor Fred Waterman to tender his resignation Sept. 11, citing the stress and hostility toward him over the noise issue and Luke's future.

Chesney and Conner want to make sure impact studies are done fairly and take into account noise impacts on nearby areas, and that the Air Force is more forthcoming the rest of this year and into next with noise levels of the  **Lockheed Martin**-built joint strike fighter.

