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Buckley AFB, other bases in holding pattern to see who will land next-generation F-35 fighter jets

“I would argue for all four major categories, Buckley is well-suited,” said Southard. “I’ve flown all over the place throughout my career, and the air space at Buckley is unique, expansive. It’s varied. It’s really good.”

By Rachel Sapin, Staff Writer, Updated: May 12, 2016 10:54 pm

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AURORA | The effort to bring the Air Force’s next-generation fighter jets to Buckley Air Force Base in Aurora is as much about what’s going on back on the ground as how clear the skies are.

Buckley AFB is one of 18 bases nationwide being considered for the next round of F-35 fighter jets, the Air Force’s newest fighter to replace legacy planes such as Buckley’s F-16s. If selected this summer, the base would receive the new jets by 2022, Buckley officials say.

Lt. Col. Christopher Southard, F-35 project officer for the 140th Wing Colorado Air National Guard, said the base is in the process of submitting criteria to the Air National Guard that will evaluate Buckley on four categories: mission, cost, capacity and environment.



A U.S. Air Force F-35A Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter from the 58th Fighter Squadron, 33rd Fighter Wing, Eglin AFB, Fla. escorts a KC-135R Stratotanker from the 336th Air Refueling Squadron, March ARB, Calif., following an aerial refueling mission, May 16, 2013 off the coast of Northwest Florida. U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. John R. Nimmo. Sr.

“They set all this objective criteria to give you a score out of 100,” he said. Once the Air National Guard selects the best candidates from the bunch, they conduct a site survey of the bases with the highest score.

“I would argue for all four major categories, Buckley is well-suited,” said Southard. “I’ve flown all over the place throughout my career, and the air space at Buckley is unique, expansive. It’s varied. It’s really good.”

He still remains “cautiously optimistic” about Buckley’s chances, since only two bases will receive the F-35s.

Southard said for the “mission” criteria, he will be sending data regarding how suited Colorado’s weather is for flying, the type of airspace pilots train in at Buckley, and details about their ongoing training at the base.



Master Sgt. Ricky Kissell, a crew chief for the 140th Wing of the Colorado Air National Guard, gives his F-16 a bath at Buckley Air Force Base. The Air Force’s F-16s are soon to be replaced by the new F-35 fighter jet. (Marla R. Keown/Aurora Sentinel)

“At Buckley we are the sole users of our space. Most ranges have many users,” he said.

“Because of our terrain, we can train in desert, flatlands, population centers and vast areas where there’s no population at all.”

The second factor — cost — is not data Southard personally submits to any federal entity. He said the Air National Guard and Air Force look at the area’s cost of living as well as how expensive and efficient it would be to bid out contracts for the operation and management of the F-35s upon arrival.

“We just had a major construction project on our runway,” he said, noting that several improvements to Buckley’s 11,000-foot runway should last for decades and likely will buffer the base’s score.

The “capacity” category is where Southard said he submits the most data concerning Buckley. He said that category evaluates how prepared a base is to house the new fighter planes.

“We already fly F-16s, and the mission type is so similar to what F-35s will do,” he said. He said infrastructure requirements for the F-35 are very similar to Buckley’s current setup for flying and housing F-16s.

Southard said that in order to qualify as one of the 18 bases to even be considered for the fighter jets, bases around the country were required to have an 8,000-foot runway and an active fighter squad.

The “environment” category, Southard said, is one where he also does not submit data. That category involves

federal entities evaluating the air quality around a base as well as how much other development has encroached on a base.

That particular area was boosted earlier this year after city and state officials announced the purchase of a 124-acre area surrounding the base to stem future encroachment of nearby housing and commercial centers as the state's third-largest city grows eastward. In all, more than 1,000 acres will be acquired by the Trust for Public Land to serve as a permanent buffer zone around the base and also provide trails and open space for residents.

“The base itself is not all that different than the city in that it’s only 60 percent built out,” said Aurora Mayor Steve Hogan, who supports Buckley’s buffering efforts. “There may be another base somewhere that closes, and what’s going on in their mission is going to come to Buckley, and we have to be ready for that, too.”

U.S. Rep. Mike Coffman, R-Aurora, said preventing encroachment around Buckley is one of the most important factors for assuring that Buckley receives the F-35s.

This year, Coffman worked with Aurora officials to secure funding for the Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) program, which was involved in the land purchase. He said the REPI program also protects Buckley’s military missions by helping to remove or avoid land-use conflicts near installations and addressing regulatory restrictions that inhibit military activities.

Coffman said he successfully increased funding for the REPI program in the 2016 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), allowing Buckley to procure parcels of land to create this buffer zone, and he worked to ensure the 2017 NDAA includes similar funding increases. Coffman pointed to encroachment as a key reason for why Lowry Air Force Base closed after nearly 60 years as a technical training base.

Coffman said he has also worked closely with both the Air Force and the Department of Defense to reconsider certain criteria used to select bases for the F-35s that would better accentuate Buckley’s qualities as a home for the fighter jets. That criteria, Coffman said, initially placed a high value on the distance from each base to its associated training ranges and required bases to be 100 nautical miles from training ranges. He said Buckley was disqualified from receiving the planes under that requirement.

“I was able to require the Air Force to consider other factors, such as weather conditions, that put the base back into consideration,” he said.

Buckley Air Force Base is the largest employer in the 6th Congressional District, which includes all of Aurora. It’s home to nearly 1,000 Colorado Air National Guard members and employs more than 13,000 people.

Meanwhile, the F-35 program has been lambasted by members of Congress as the most expensive weapons program in U.S. military history. The Pentagon plans to spend close to \$400 billion to buy nearly 2,500 F-35s for the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps. The budget request for fiscal year 2017 includes \$8.3 billion to

purchase 63 aircraft. The F-35, designed to meet the specific requirements of each of the services, costs more than \$100 million each.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., called the program a “scandal” during an oversight hearing held by the committee in April, noting that the aircraft’s development schedule has stretched to 15 years, deliveries have been delayed, and costs have skyrocketed.

“I continue to fight to reduce the cost for the program, but the decision to go with the F-35 was made long before I got to Congress and that is a separate issue from whether or not they will be based at Buckley,” said Coffman in response to the recent criticism.



Defense Secretary Ash Carter, right, with Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford Jr., confers with an aide on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, April 27, 2016, before the start of a Senate Defense subcommittee hearing to review the fiscal 2017 Defense Department budget request. (AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta)

This is the second round of evaluations the Air National Guard is conducting to roll out the F-35. In 2014 the Vermont Air National Guard was chosen out of 83 military bases nationwide as the first Air National Guard unit to receive an F35-A.

— *The Associated Press and the 460th Space Wing public affairs department contributed to this story.*

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Maybe the Air Guard should forget about the fighter business and get into the cargo business. Some C-130s might be an easier gig to land and a heck of a lot friendlier. Not as much fun for the fighter jocks but hey, it pays the bills. Expand your horizons!

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Hopefully not as the F-35 is a crappy airplane.

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