

Marines using leased land as landing zones

By Kelsey Stiglitz The Daily News

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Thanks to a state-managed program, Marines from Camp Lejeune and New River are landing planes on leases at Bladen Lakes State Forest and Caledonia Correctional Institution.

All it takes is a 20-minute flight.

Leases in Halifax County and Bladen county are serving as tactical landing zones for Marines at Camp Lejeune and MCAS New River.

According to deputy director of range and training, management division operations and training department, MCIEAST, Chip Olmstead, the MV-22 Osprey is the only aircraft being used at each site, but it allows Marines to train outside of the confines of the congested Camp Lejeune air space.

“It’s giving them more freedom of maneuver and ability to operate the aircraft as it was intended to be used,” Olmstead said.

Besides being out-of-the-way spaces, the leases, located at Bladen Lakes State Forest and Caledonia Correctional Institution are a short hop, skip and jump away from Lejeune, each one less than half an hour away by air.

“It gives them a lot of time on station to do all their training and then return back to New River,” Olmstead said.

Olmstead said he has not heard any complaints from community members in Bladen County, and the only concerns coming from Caledonia were from members of a nearby rural community who wanted to know what the military craft were doing.

Brian Haines, public information officer for the North Carolina Forest Service, said locals are relatively accustomed to military exercises and the landing zone in Bladen Lakes is pretty secluded from residential areas.

“It’s a field that they land on -- there really isn’t anything out there,” Haines said.

Part of the agreement is conservation, so keeping the land leased in good shape is also part of the training objective for Marines.

That, and it keeps the environment more tactical to allow them to practice skills needed in combat, Olmstead said.

“It’s about giving them the opps without giving them all the burdens and restraints,” Olmstead said.

The restraints are often due to the crowding over Lejeune and New River, but can also stem from the nature of the environment.

“The military is often looking for areas where there’s not a lot of population of houses and things along those lines,” Raines said.

The lease agreement is the culmination of more than three years of work between the state and the Marine Corps to identify and prepare suitable lands for the Osprey.

Olmstead said it was the leases have been an ongoing process for the past few years, and the National Environmental Policy Act did an extensive study on outlying tactical landing zones, which included an assessment of noise levels.

The published studies are available to the public at the Bladen County Library and the Halifax County Library.

“It’s been a very cooperative arrangement with the state and the agricultural commissioner,” Olmstead said.

Another program, Forest Opportunities for Resource Conservation and Environmental Security (FORCES), under North Carolina Sentiental Landscapes, works with private landowners to conserve forest land by working with state conservation officers and the military.

It is solely a conservation program and does not authorize military access to participating land, according to North Carolina Sentinel Landscapes.

“(The lease) is great opportunity for the forest itself and there’s a lot of programs such as FORCES that can help conserve forest land,” Raines said.

For more information on FORCES or to get involved, private landowners can contact their county ranger’s office.

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