



NEWS RELEASE--FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Tucson Forward is very pleased that the Air Force is at last conducting an Environmental Assessment (EA) of the Snowbird Program at Davis-Monthan (DM). This move comes after three years of pressure from Tucson Forward and complaints from Tucson citizens to the Air Force in Washington about the safety, noise, negative impact, and the actual legality of the Program.

Operation Snowbird started in 1972 as a two-week, winter operation to maintain flight proficiency of northern, winter-bound Air National Guard (ANG) units. The only environmental assessment of the Program and its air operations was completed in 1978 and concluded it had a minimal impact on Tucson's safety, noise and environment. However, after a fatal crash near the UA, the Air Force wrote a letter to the Tucson community saying it would limit DM-based aircraft to the A-10 and would explore limiting ANG aircraft at DM.

Since 2000, Operation Snowbird was quietly expanded to year-round pre-deployment combat training, including foreign and sister-service pilot training without any safety assessment, noise assessment, or public notice to the residents under the flight paths. This expansion brought in F-15s, F-16s, F-18s, Harriers, and Tornados at low levels over populated Tucson neighborhoods. All of these aircraft have higher accident rates and are significantly noisier than the normal DM mission aircraft (A-10s and C-130s).

There was never an environmental analysis of the expanded Snowbird Program done as required by federal NEPA law. As a result, Operation Snowbird has been operating outside of federal NEPA law since 2000.

While pleased that an EA will finally be undertaken, Tucson Forward is concerned that it may be superficial. The upcoming EA must address the safety risks to our city, the increased noise and air pollution, and the economic damage suffered by the neighborhoods under the flight paths. The latter would include Julia Keen, which lost its school due to aircraft noise and safety in 2004 and has suffered declining property values. Other flight-path neighborhoods such as Arroyo Chico, Broadmoor, Sam Hughes and Blenman-Elm can expect to follow suit with an increase of noisier and less safe air traffic.

It should also examine the impact on Tucson's major job generator, the hospitality and ecotourism industry, including institutions such as Lodge on the Desert, the Arizona Inn, B & Bs, Tucson Botanical Gardens and the Zoo.

Finally, the EA must look at reasonable alternatives as required by the NEPA law. As the AF itself determined in 1978, Tucson is an unsuitable candidate for expansive military air operations because our city surrounds Davis-Monthan on three sides. Reasonable alternatives are airfields not surrounded by high density urban development such as Gila Bend Auxiliary Field, Pinal Air Park or Libby Field.

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