

## Battle begins to bring F-35 fighters to Luke AFB

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Published: October 14, 2009 at 8:00 pm

Taking center stage on an issue that has long been dear to her heart, Gov. Jan Brewer announced a campaign to help make Luke Air Force Base the primary training complex for the military's F-35 Lightning joint-strike fighter.

Brewer, a longtime Glendale resident who said she often hears the "sound of freedom" as F-16s fly over her house, has been a vocal supporter of the base throughout her 26 years in public office and was a founding member of the Fighter Country Partnership, an advocacy group for the base. Brewer said it's critical to bring the new fighter to Luke to help the base maintain its mission and to ensure Arizona's economic future.

She said the Luke Forward campaign will help convey to the U.S. Department of Defense that Luke Air Force Base has the full support of the community and is the ideal location for the F-35.

"Frankly, no other area in the country can compare to the size, scope and outdoor training ability," Brewer said in an Oct. 14 press conference at the Executive Tower. "Given our state's current economic condition, this stable, recession-proof industry needs to be maintained and strengthened."

Taking the stage with Brewer were representatives from a number of West Valley cities, including Glendale Mayor Elaine Scruggs. Like Brewer, Scruggs focused on the assets that she feels makes Luke the best choice for the Air Force and the F-35 – strong infrastructure, state laws crafted to protect Luke from nearby development and the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range, a 2.7 million acre training area for pilots from the base.

Scruggs also joined Brewer in emphasizing the base's economic importance to Arizona.

"Luke is sort of a mini stimulus package every single year for businesses in Arizona. So we're asking you to let our military's decision-makers know that Arizona and Luke Air Force Base are mission ready," she said.

Charlie Freericks, chairman of the Fighter Country Partnership, said Luke employs about 8,000 people, and another 80,000 retired employees in the Valley rely on the base for services such as shopping and health benefits.

For many years, Luke has been the primary training base for the Air Force's F-16 Falcon. Brewer noted that the F-16, however, is being phased out of service, and said the consequences for Luke could be dire if the F-35 is not brought in to replace it.

"You all know what will happen to Luke. It will be probably closed down. We will lose that \$2.7 billion into our economy, and we will not be the premier base that trains fighters to protect us from our enemies," she said.

The campaign is aimed at generating support for the F-35 among members of the public, business leaders and elected officials. Two high-ranking elected officials, Sen. John McCain and Rep. Trent Franks, are on board.

Scruggs read prepared statements from McCain and Franks. McCain wrote that he is committed to ensuring that there is a full study of the environmental impacts, but also called

Luke a “critical national aspect” and said he is confident that the military will take the necessary steps to mitigate the environmental impact of the F-35.

“I look forward to working with you all to make sure that the success story we have written for our nation’s military assets in Arizona is understood back in Washington,” McCain wrote.

Franks said he believes Luke’s mission is vital to both the community and to the continued security of the United States. He touted the base’s attributes and qualifications as the home of the F-35.

“Luke’s robust and modern infrastructure provides the Department of Defense with a site that is extremely well-suited to fifth-generation fighter tactics and training. With 360 days of sunshine each year, complimented by the Barry M. Goldwater Range and a network of auxiliary airfields, the Luke training environment is state-of-the-art, adaptable and second-to-none,” Franks wrote.

Not everyone is on board with the push to bring the F-35 to Luke. To Brewer, the roar of F-16 engines above her house may be the sound of freedom, but to El Mirage Mayor Michele Kern, who was notably absent from the coterie of West Valley representatives at the press conference, the sound of F-35s is a potentially major source of noise pollution.

Kern wrote a letter to U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates asking that a full environmental impact study be conducted before any decision is made to bring the F-35 to Luke. Kern cited the Air Force’s own assessment that the F-35 was louder than any aircraft in use by the military, and requested that the Department of Defense bring in at least two F-35 prototypes to conduct training flights out of Luke for a week so nearby residents can see – or hear – for themselves what it will be like to have the new joint strike fighters in the skies above them.

In a press release, public relations firm Rose & Allyn, which is representing El Mirage, said the city is committed to working with Luke Air Force Base, but urged federal officials to heed the city’s request.

“El Mirage has been a good neighbor of Luke Air Force Base for more than 50 years. Looking toward the future of that relationship, the city is simply trying to assess the impact of the new F-35. It would be irresponsible to ignore the potential noise impact, as El Mirage is home to more fly-overs than any other community the in the West Valley,” according to the press release.

The Department of Defense is expected to release its short list of candidates for the F-35 in early 2010, and a final decision is expected in 2011.