

GLENDALE REPUBLIC

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Race is on to land F-35 training mission

The Air Force's announcement last week that Luke Air Force Base is on the short list for the F-35 fighter-jet-training mission is a bit like a race official firing a starter gun. The focus is on what contestants do now. Forgotten is what it took to reach the starting line.

Luke and its supporters, recognizing the base as a state and national asset, fought their way

to this point, a chance to extend Luke's life as a vaunted training base for pilots by landing the next-generation fighter jet.

Statutorily and politically, Luke supporters for years have worked to protect the base in Glendale from development encroachment.

Two weeks ago, in anticipation of the Air Force's announcement of possible F-35 locations, supporters, including Gov. Jan Brewer, launched the Luke



NEAL CHAPMAN/LOCKHEED MARTIN

Luke Air Force Base is on the short list for training pilots to fly the F-35 fighter jet.

Forward campaign to inform the public of the base's value and to persuade officials in Washington, D.C., to continue Luke's mission as a premier schoolhouse for fighter pilots.

Luke Forward also is a counter of sorts to a public-relations and lobbying campaign launched by El Mirage, a city aggressively challenging assumptions

that Luke's impact on surrounding communities is entirely positive. El Mirage says it's officially neutral on the F-35, but it clearly stands apart from its West Valley neighbors in its public posture about the fifth-generation fighter jet and Luke.

In a military assessment of bases that includes an environmental-impact

study and community opinion, the efforts of Luke Forward and El Mirage will have an impact on the race to the finish.

Luke is on the short list for the secondary site-training locations, along with Eglin Air Force Base in Florida, which already has an F-35 presence; Holloman Air Force Base in New Mexico; Boise Air Terminal Air Guard Station in Idaho; and Tucson International Airport Air Guard Station, home of the 162nd Fighter Wing, which trains F-16 pilots and is the nation's largest Air National Guard.

The Air Force's short list for possible training sites for its new F-35 Joint Strike Fighter confirms the military understands Arizona offers a lot of what it needs: the climate, the amenities, the pilot-training tradition. These are the things that helped Luke get to this point.

The race for the site-selection finish line is on.