

Brewer urges Pentagon to bring F-35 to Luke Air Force Base

*by Erin Kelly - April 12, 2010
Gannett Washington Bureau*

WASHINGTON - Gov. Jan Brewer and a delegation of about 20 elected officials and Phoenix-area business leaders lobbied top Air Force generals for four hours Monday in an effort to convince them that Luke Air Force Base would be the best place to train pilots on the new F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

"We gave it 100 percent, and I think we were successful," Brewer said afterward in an interview with the Republic on Capitol Hill. "It just felt good."

Although Air Force officials made no promises, the governor said they noted Luke's strengths, including strong community support, good year-round flying weather, and the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range, a 2.7 million-acre pilot training area.

"All the puzzle pieces fit together," Brewer said.

The one weakness that Air Force officials raised is that Maricopa County is a so-called "non-attainment area" under the Clean Air Act, meaning that it does not meet federal standards for the amount of fine particulate dust and soot in the air.

Brewer said Air Force officials expressed some concern about the pollution but said they did not expect that any F-35s brought to the base would add significantly to the problem.

The governor said she would meet with Arizona Department of Environmental Quality officials to provide more information to the Air Force about the situation and to see what might be done to lessen the problem.

The Air Force is scheduled to announce its preferred F-35 training site this summer. After that, a federal environmental impact statement must be completed before the Air Force makes its final decision next year.

Brewer and local elected officials have made saving the base a top priority. The F-35 training mission could replace the existing F-16 Falcon training program as the older fighter planes are phased out.

Luke Air Force Base employs about 8,000 people and pumps about \$2.7 million per year into the area's economy.

"It would be a real blow to the state of Arizona to lose it," Brewer said.

Paul Senseman, the governor's deputy chief of staff and spokesman, said Air Force officials told the state delegation that Brewer was the only governor to come in person to lobby the Pentagon for the F-35.

He said they also were impressed with the size of the delegation that came from Arizona in support of bringing the training mission to Luke. In addition to Brewer, the delegation included Glendale Mayor Elaine Scruggs, Mesa Mayor Scott Smith, Attorney General Terry Goddard, and Michael Bidwill, president of the Arizona Cardinals. The trip was organized by the Greater Phoenix Economic Council.

Among the top Pentagon officials at the meeting were Gen. Norton Schwartz, the Air Force chief of staff; Maj. Gen. Robin Round of the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force; and Gen. Carrol Chandler, vice chief of staff for the Air Force.

Brewer flew to Washington, D.C., on Sunday night and was scheduled to return to Arizona on Monday night.

"It's a quick turnaround, but I felt it was well worth the time and energy," the governor said. "I think we all feel encouraged by the reception we received."