

Tejon Ranch, Military Work Out Concerns

Three large planned developments won't interfere with flight training, analysis shows.

After a year of study, a top Defense Department official has concluded that development of three large projects on Tejon Ranch would not interfere with training flights over the Tehachapi Mountains or diminish the nation's military readiness.

Navy Rear Adm. J. L. Betancourt, writing on behalf of military services in California, said in a letter to Tejon Ranch executives that a military analysis of the projects has allayed his concern that construction of the proposed new city of Centennial, near Gorman, would prevent low-level training flights by Navy, Marine and Air Force combat pilots.

Federal regulations prohibit military flights lower than 1,000 feet over cities, while military pilots often train at altitudes of just 200 feet.

"The Department of Defense does not, from a conceptual standpoint, oppose development," Betancourt wrote in a recent letter to Robert Stine, president of Tejon Ranch.

"I believe we have come to a mutual understanding that the existence of [Defense Department] Military Training Routes over Tejon Ranch Co. development ... should not preclude your planning efforts with regard to these three areas," Betancourt wrote.

In the fall of 2003, Betancourt requested that then Gov.-elect Arnold Schwarzenegger intervene in the development of the Centennial project, or move it away from flight paths.

Betancourt requested that Schwarzenegger's statewide planning office devise a regional strategy to consider Centennial and two other projects planned on the sprawling ranch along Interstate 5 in Kern and Los Angeles counties.

A new law gave that office expanded powers in resolving development disputes related to the military.

Representatives of the governor's Office of Military Base Retention and Reuse assisted in early meetings last year, officials said.

Now, according to Betancourt's letter, potential problems have been ironed out.

A military analysis, he wrote, "has not identified any threshold issues that would render Tejon Ranch development plans incompatible with [Defense Department] operations along [training routes] in the vicinity."

The military will maintain its training routes, which include flights over the Antelope Valley high desert, where 70,000-resident Centennial would be built, Betancourt said.

But he suggested that flight paths could be altered to coexist with planned urban development.

"Shaping [of] aircraft flight profiles ... may be operationally feasible based on existing aircraft and missions," Betancourt wrote.

The military's position could change based on the requirements of new aircraft or on how the ranch is eventually developed, he said.

Ranch executives said, however, that they only plan to build on 5% of the 270,000-acre ranch, the largest contiguous holding by a single owner in California.

Those plans include a huge warehouse project at the foot of the Grapevine, south of Bakersfield; a mountain resort of about 4,000 homes near Tejon Lake in Kern County; and the new town of Centennial, with 23,000 dwellings and 14 million square feet of commercial space in Los Angeles County.

"After we had a series of meetings showing the admiral and his staff all of our plans, it became clear that there wasn't a compatibility problem," Stine said. "Now we really consider this issue resolved."

Stine said the key to resolution was understanding that Tejon Ranch plans to develop only a tiny portion of its property, at least for the next 25 years.

"Their concern was that there were going to be Centennials all over the ranch," Stine said.

Both sides finally agreed that, given the scope of development, and the width of military training routes — often eight to 10 miles — there was plenty of room for combat jets to train without coming close to the developments, Stine said.

"Centennial is, at full build-out, only three miles wide, which gives them plenty of room to fly their missions and not create any hazard or incompatibility," Stine said.

Centennial is in the heart of a military training area.

"The project site is the hub of a number of air routes connecting major training areas in California coastal waters with desert ranges, as well as connecting key California military airfields," a 2003 military report said.

Those include naval stations at Lemoore, Point Mugu, China Lake and El Centro, a Marine base at Miramar and Edwards Air Force Base.

But Stine said that a review of military flight records over the last five years showed an average of 100 flights a year over the ranch.

"So it's not a high-frequency corridor," he said.

The Centennial project is now before Los Angeles County planners, and ranch consultants are preparing an environmental analysis, expected to be heard by the county Planning Commission this fall.

Tejon Ranch has been largely devoted to raising cattle since 1843.

But over the last two years, officials have outlined plans for the three projects — which would effectively link urban Southern California with the rural Central Valley, filling parts of a 75-mile expanse between Santa Clarita and Bakersfield.

Alone, the Centennial project would be the largest housing development in Los Angeles County history.