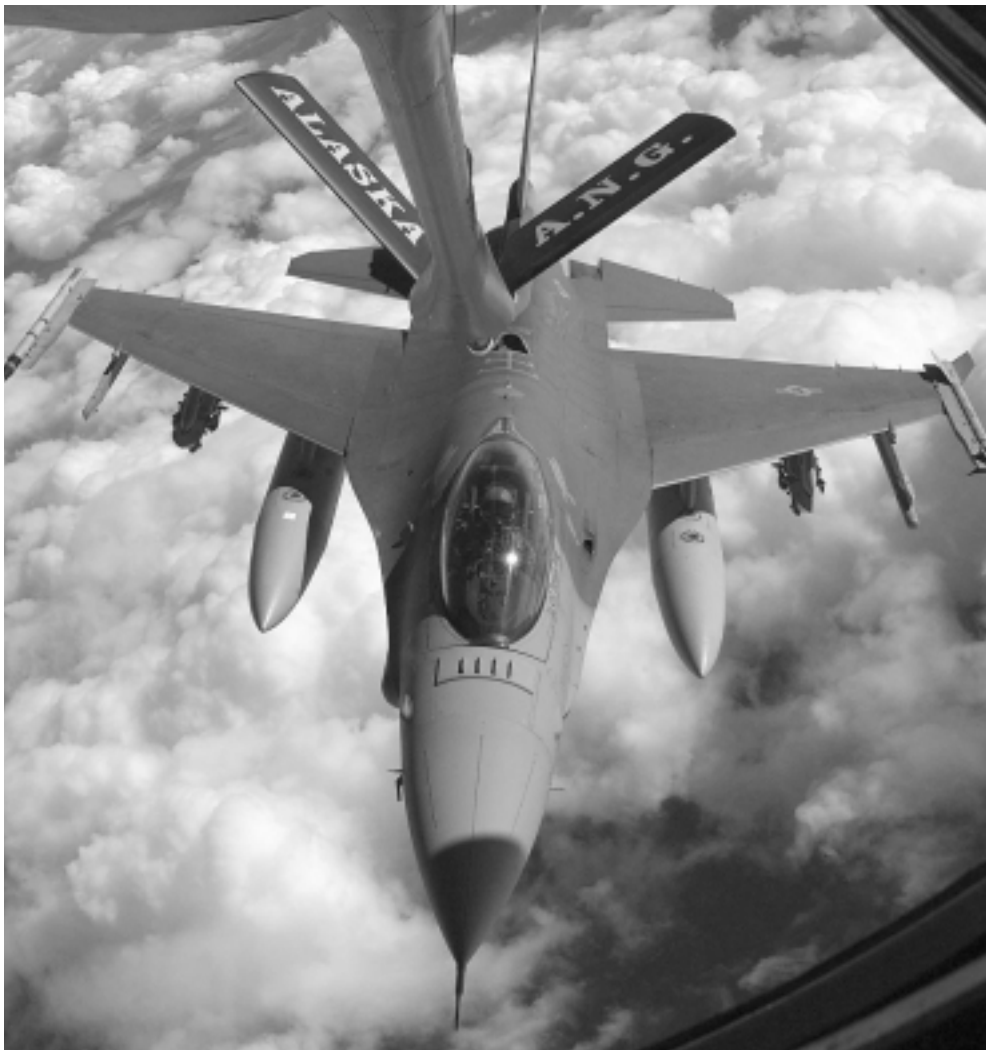


DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

February 10: An Alaska Air National Guard F-16 participates in exercises above the Nevada desert.

How low can you go?

Grace Potorti doesn't think she's asking for much. Maybe a little quiet. After all, she lives in a rural desert area. Instead, she finds herself living in an environment crisscrossed by low-level training flights conducted by the air force, where "children run for cover, livestock and wildlife panic and stampede, and sensitive public lands are in danger of being set ablaze." And it's not a little noise—the roar generated by low-flying fighters can exceed rock concert noise levels of 110 decibels.

After more than a decade of asking the air force to complete a programmatic environmental impact statement, Potorti, executive director of the Rural Alliance for Military Accountability, said enough is enough. Her group, together with the Center for Biological Diversity and others, filed a lawsuit in a Washington, D.C. federal court in late January to force the service to reevaluate its flight training program.

Their lawsuit contends that under the National Environmental Policy Act, all federal agencies must file environmental impact statements for "major federal actions that significantly affect the quality of the human environment."

The suit is a response to "new attempts and cumulative efforts" by the air force over the past 20 years to gobble up more and more air space without "any national needs assessment being done," Portorti said. "There's no accountability or oversight other than the Federal Aviation Administration, which rubber stamps most Pentagon requests.

"City folks don't know what it means to have F-18s flying over their houses at 100 feet."

But Capt. Joe Della Vedova, an air force press desk officer, said the air force has conducted numerous environmental impact statements. "We have people who do them all the time and we devote a considerable effort to maintaining the environment in our ranges," he said.

Potorti's position, however, is that the air force has not looked comprehensively at its training activities. Instead, it conducts site-specific studies. For example, in response to an impact statement for air force training activities at Holloman air force base in New Mexico, the Bureau of Land Management noted that "the air force is fragmenting the National Environmental

Policy Act process by presenting new air . . . use in a piecemeal fashion." The air force produced a draft statement in the mid-1980s, but it was never finalized.

In a prepared statement, the air force said that the low-level training conducted in military operations areas is essential for combat readiness and provides American pilots with the realistic experience necessary to maintain proficiency and reduce U.S. casualties.

"The air force works closely with federal agencies, Native American tribes, and local governments to balance its test, training, and readiness requirements with responsible environmental stewardship and traditional land uses (such as recreation, hunting, grazing, etc.)," the statement said, adding that "while the air force uses airspace over the United States, the FAA owns and controls all of it and we comply with all of their regulations."

The air force's low-level flight training program consists of thousands of miles of routes and covers approximately one million square miles. According to the suit filed by the Western Environmental Law Center, the program includes training flights flown by pilots from foreign militaries such as the German and Singaporean air forces, who use their own aircraft. Low-level training flights are conducted in "low-altitude airspace," a band extending from 3,000 feet to 100 feet above ground level. Most flights are in the 200–500 foot range.

"To a large extent, the air force has chosen to use airspace directly above the National Wilderness Preservation System, the National Park System, the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System, and the National Wildlife Refuge System," according to the law center. They contend that in a typical month, the air force schedules more than 48,000 domestic training flights.

—Bret Lortie

And then they went home

When women arrived at the gates outside Britain's Greenham Common in 1981 to protest NATO's decision to place cruise missiles there, few could have predicted that 18 years later there would still be trailers and tents outside the base gates. When the missiles went home in 1989, the women stayed. When the base closed in 1992, the women stayed.

Then nobody thought the women would go home.

On September 5, 1999, the eighteenth anniversary of the first march, they finally did.

BRENDA PRINCE/FORMAT

An early 1980s protest at the main gate to the U.S. Air Force base at Greenham Common.

The story of Greenham Common is now a piece of Cold War folklore. Although the peace camp was often known best for its most sensational aspects—the children born and raised there, the alternative lifestyles, or the easily parodied leftist stereotypes—the camp boasted many victories. In December 1982, 30,000 women joined hands in a circle around the base, and in April of the following year, 70,000 supporters formed a 14-mile human chain linking Greenham with the British nuclear weapons labs at Burghfield and Aldermaston. Another 50,000 women brought down part of the fence that December, bringing international attention to the cause of nuclear disarmament.

One of the camp's more interesting victories came in 1992, when a suit filed by protesters claiming that the production of nuclear weapons breaks international law continued through two jury trials. The case resulted in hung juries.

Camp members plan to commemorate their activities by turning their former home at Greenham into a historical site with sculptures, gardens, standing stones, and information kiosks.

—B.L.

WEB Watch

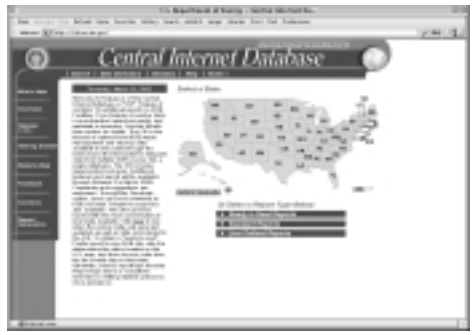
Nuclear waste cleanup

After more than a decade of litigation, a lawsuit filed in 1989 by the Natural Resources Defense Council and other organizations has resulted in an Energy Department website that allows the public to search numerous department databases related to radioactive waste, spent nuclear fuel, and other materials for 134 sites. The suit alleged that Energy failed to finish a programmatic environmental impact statement. The Central Internet Database (cid.em.doe.gov) satisfies one of three major requirements of a 1998 settlement, which also forces the department to conduct a study of long-term stewardship for its sites and establish a $6.25 million fund for technical and scientific reviews.

The website houses a remarkable amount of information. There are 33 site profiles, reports listing the annual amounts of waste generated by the department, and projections for waste generation and inventories. There's also esoteric info. Want to know how many feet of sidewalk Energy has laid at the Nevada Test Site, or how many barns are at Fermilab? It's all there.

What watchdogs might find more useful is the ability to generate specific reports on high-level, vitrified, low- and mixed low-level, and transuranic waste. In a matter of minutes, for example, I discovered that in 1998 there were 2,135 metric tons of spent nuclear fuel stored at the Hanford Site and that Energy projects an inventory increase of 1,956 canisters of vitrified high-level waste between now and 2010.

The database is not easy to use. It took more than a cursory look to figure out the differences between various reports and how the numbers are reported. Reports are generated on-the-fly based on user input and are provided in Adobe's Portable Document Format (PDF). This alone makes things cumbersome, as many Internet users may not have the free software or expertise to understand how to download and view reports. The site explains how, but providing results in standard HTML would make navigation easier.

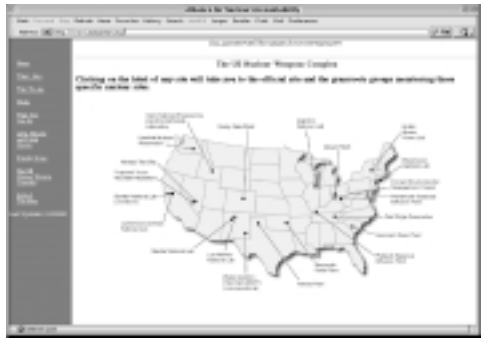


Unfortunately, some data are excluded, such as classified, UCNI (unclassified controlled nuclear information), or proprietary information. The settlement also allows Energy to exclude any data related to commercial spent fuel and waste managed by the Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program.

Other resources

A jumping off point for more information about the nuclear weapons complex cleanup is at the Resources for the Future's Center for Risk Management (www.rff.org/nuclearcleanup). While the bibliography and articles may be interesting in some circles, this site's external links—to news sources, periodicals, and "stakeholder" organizations dedicated to these issues—are especially useful.

The Alliance for Nuclear Accountability's "U.S. Nuclear Weapons Complex" page is another helpful resource. A map shows the locations of 21 "hotspots," and clicking on one of the labels brings up both the web address for official government-sponsored home pages as well as links, where available, and contact numbers for organizations monitoring that facility.



Another links page related to radiation, the environment, and health is the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research (www.ieer.org/links.html). From general background information to other resources on the web, this nuclear-focused portal is sure to answer many questions.

—B.L.

"When I was coming up, it was a dangerous world and you knew exactly who they were. It was us versus 'them' and it was clear who them was. Today we are not so sure who the they are, but we know they're there."

George W. Bush's articulation of the "foreign threat," as explained during the New Hampshire primary.