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[Mile Markers](#)
[Crime Reports](#)

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[Editorials](#)
[Commentary](#)
[Letters](#)
[Citizen's Voice](#)

SPORTS

[Today in Sports](#)
[Scores & More](#)

BUSINESS

[This week](#)
[Columns](#)
[Tech Talk](#)
[Biz Directory](#)
[Real Estate Net](#)

KEYS LIFE

[Lifestyles](#)
[Homes](#)
[Kudos](#)
[Columns](#)

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[Features](#)
[Columns](#)

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[Commentary](#)
[Entertainment](#)
[Keys Life](#)
[Health](#)
[Food](#)
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[Death Notices](#)

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Feds reopen jet noise investigation - 02/07/2010

[Back to Search Results](#)

The Department of Defense has reopened an investigation into whether Navy officials altered or downplayed the effects of a report on the impacts of louder fighter jets coming to train at Naval Air Station Key West.

The department sent Upper Keys resident John Hammerstrom a letter late last month telling him it was reopening a case into his complaint that Navy officials did not follow proper protocol before allowing F/A-18 Super Hornets to regularly train at the Boca Chica base. The Super Hornet training has been a source of noise complaints from Lower Keys residents.

In 2007, Hammerstrom and members of the Florida Keys Citizen Coalition filed a complaint with Assistant Secretary for Navy Installations and Environment B.J. Penn. They asked him to determine if Key West Navy officials conducted a thorough enough review of the Super Hornet issue before allowing them to regularly fly over the Lower Keys, and if any parts of the report had been altered. Penn ruled that Key West officials had complied with Navy policy.

Hammerstrom appealed the ruling to the Office of the Inspector General, which also sided with the Navy in a ruling it made in April.

Hammerstrom then appealed that decision to the Integrity Committee of the Council of the Inspector General. Late last month, the Integrity Committee sent Hammerstrom a letter saying it would ask the inspector general to reopen the case.

The Navy completed an "environmental assessment" for Fleet Support and Infrastructure Improvements in 2003, which stated there was "no significant impact" to "off-base noise exposure." The Navy did not do a more thorough and Lower Keys-specific "environmental impact statement" because the Super Hornets train at Boca Chica but are based elsewhere, according to Penn's letter.

The Integrity Committee, in its letter, did not explain why it wanted the case reopened, which comes at a time when public tension between the Navy and Lower Keys residents has subsided.

The Monroe County Commission in March issued its strongest warning yet to the Navy, insisting it halt flight training operations involving Super Hornets. The county and Navy held one joint meeting after the request was made, but had not been able to agree on the best way to protect residents from the noise and still allow the Super Hornets to train. The Navy wants the county to limit development around the base to keep new residents from being affected by the noise, to which the county tentatively agreed. The county wanted the Navy to alter its flight paths. The Navy said it would as much as it could and still allow for training.

The issue since has been on the back burner for both the Navy and County Commission.

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"We are back to operating the way we have always been operating," base spokesman Jim Brooks said.

The noise debate has not died down in other areas of the nation. The issue is heating up in both Virginia and Arizona.

Construction of single-family homes near Luke Air Force Base will end under a settlement negotiated Tuesday among state and county officials, according to a report in the Arizona Republic newspaper.

The agreement ends more than a year of fighting between Arizona's attorney general and the Maricopa County Board of Supervisors about the same residential encroachment issue Boca Chica base faces, the Arizona Republic reported.

The settlement requires county officials to prohibit single-family development in high-accident and high-noise areas around Luke Air Force Base, Luke Auxiliary Airfield and Gila Bend Air Force Auxiliary Field.

No such development has ever been prohibited in Monroe County, even though county commissioners said they would discourage it around Boca Chica in the future.

Maricopa County Supervisor Don Stapley, chairman of the board, called the agreement an attempt to protect the public.

"Our hope is that it will protect them -- this is a safety issue, a welfare issue," he told the Arizona Republic. "You don't want people building homes in crash zones in areas that are unsafe."

Arizona's attorney general sued the county in August 2008 to stop it from issuing building permits for new homes in Luke's restricted areas. The county countersued, asking the courts to strike down as unconstitutional the law that prevented building in those areas. The county maintained that landowner property rights prevented the denial of building permits in the restricted zones.


Lawmakers in Virginia are considering legislation that could give residents of southeast Virginia a significant boost in their fight against the proposed construction of a Navy outlying landing field, according to the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

The bill would give localities more land use control by repealing existing provisions that require local governments to adopt Navy zoning ordinances, according to the Times-Dispatch.

The proposal would thwart efforts to place a Navy outlying landing field, a training facility, in southeast Virginia.

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