

Letter doesn't bode well for relations

County's letter to Navy criticizes its jet-noise studies, or lack thereof

BY ADAM LINHARDT Citizen Staff

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The fighter jet noise issue at Naval Air Station Key West has been a loud one for nearly a decade and a respite in the tumult doesn't appear forthcoming if a recent letter sent by Monroe County commissioners to the Navy is any indicator.

Commissioners sent the Navy a 12-page letter in August that lays out 41 points the county would like addressed before the Navy finalizes its 800-page Draft Environmental Impact Statement for future flight operations at Boca Chica Field.

The first point and one of the county's central beefs is the Navy's intended plan to introduce the new F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter in the coming years, and using the latest F/A-18 E/F Super Hornet as a baseline when studying noise levels of the new jet.

The thorny issue centers on the county's claim that the Navy never properly studied the F/A-18 E/F Super Hornet noise levels and its impact at Naval Air Station Key West -- that argument goes back to 2003.

That year, the Navy released a 200-page document called the Environmental Assessment for Fleet Support and Infrastructure Improvements. The Navy contends its transition from the F-14 Tomcat aircraft (made famous in the 1980s Tom Cruise movie "Top Gun") to the F/A-18 E/F Super Hornet was done without proper study.

The county further claims a subsequent research document released by the Navy in 2003 called the "Finding of No Significant Impact" also fails to properly explain the F/A-18 E/F Super Hornet.

And therein lies the heart of the county's concern:

"The Navy has claimed that the 2003 [environmental assessment] and the April 14, 2003, Finding of No Significant Impact satisfies their obligations to evaluate the introduction of the Super Hornet to Naval Air Station Key West, despite the fact that there is no mention of the Super Hornet in any of the documents leading up to the final environmental assessment, and no mention of the aircraft in the proposed actions, nor the alternatives, nor in the Finding of No Significant Impact," the county's letter states.

The county also said that among the more than 400 pages of National Environmental Policy Act documents related to those 2003 environmental studies, the Super Hornet is mentioned in only three pages.

"There is one 'reference' in the [2003] environmental assessment that discusses the Super Hornet," the county letter states.

"The creation date of that document was after the date of the Finding of No Significant Impact."

Because of that, the county contends the Navy violated the National Environmental Policy Act by not completing a thorough analysis of the F/A-18 E/F Super Hornet.

And that is important, because the county wants to know how the incoming F-35 compares with the F/A-18 E/F Super Hornet, said County Commissioner Kim Wigington, whose district includes Stock Island, Key Haven and much of New Town Key West.

The new fighter jet will begin arriving in 2016 to replace the older F-18 Hornets, but the larger F/A-18 E/F Super Hornet is expected to stay in the skies for much longer, according to the Navy.

The Citizen sent Navy Fleet Forces Command an email that outlined the county's letter and asked for any documentation it may have to bolster the Navy's position that it has properly studied the latest Super Hornet's impact, and that its research met legal guidelines under the National Environmental Policy Act.

The Citizen also asked for comment on the county's suggestion that the Navy evaluate the F/A-18 E/F Super Hornet as a "next generation aircraft" in its environmental impact statement.

"U.S. Fleet Forces Command is in the process of preparing a response to the comments from the Monroe County Commission," Fleet Forces Command spokesman Ted Brown wrote in response. "It would be inappropriate to discuss this response before we are able to respond to the [County] Commission." Key Largo resident John Hammerstrom, a former Naval aviator, aeronautical engineer and member of the county's

Environmental Impact Statement Task Force -- an oversight committee formed in 2010 to address concerns about military jet noise -- said the Navy needs to take a step back before going forward.

"The Navy is attempting to have the best of both worlds," Hammerstrom said, "without having evaluated its impacts, to firmly entrench the Super Hornet operations at Naval Air Station Key West by deftly including the Super Hornet in the baseline of the F-35 aircraft environmental impact study and simultaneously asserting that the F-35 has no greater impacts by comparing it to the Super Hornet."

A final version of the NAS Key West environmental impact statement, to be released summer 2013, should address how much the Navy took the county's concerns to heart.

A final Navy decision will be released in fall 2013.

Commissioner George Neugent said he approved the county letter with hesitation, citing the importance of the Navy to the local economy and to the nation, as many pilots who end up flying overseas train at Boca Chica Field. Neugent was frank in his assessment.

"I don't know how we solve this issue," he said, adding that he must weigh residents' quality of life, too. "The Navy is going to continue to fly and train our pilots, and to delay them from doing that by requiring an environmental impact statement on the F/A-18 Super Hornet, with the F-35s coming in, I just don't know where to go with that. We can't continue to poke the Navy without bringing some solutions to the table."

The county and the Navy have found common ground in related issues in recent months. In August, the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity gave its blessing to some joint land development regulations for properties surrounding the Boca Chica airfield. Most considered the land development rules a compromise between the Navy and the county in another complicated issue. But the county is not being stubborn in the jet noise study, Wigington said.

"How much is the process worth if people are not held accountable?" Wigington asked. "The law isn't worth anything if people are not held accountable to follow it, whether they be the federal government, state government or county government or anyone else."

"It's in this process where solutions are found."

She added that the environmental studies are built "block by block."

"This current environmental impact statement is only as good what it was built upon, and there's a major component missing," Wigington said, referring to the 2003 study.

"I think we have the responsibility to do our duty to the people and hold up that study, to hold them accountable."

Neugent said the county is committed to working with the Navy and will continue to do so, but there appears to be no lull to the din on the horizon.

"This is a dilemma where there might not be a solution," he said.

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