

Tucson Region

D-M cuts noise from flights over Tucson

With higher flight altitudes, folks 'will hear a difference'

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Davis-Monthan Air Force Base is turning down the volume of the "sound of freedom."

On Wednesday, for the first time in decades, the base changed the way its warplanes fly, a first step in efforts to reduce military aircraft noise over Tucson.

D-M jets have increased their daytime altitude by one-third — from 1,500 feet to 2,000 feet above ground level — when they come in for landings over the city center. Helicopters also are flying higher in some cases, and in other cases they now use a new route over a less-populated part of the city.

The moves are the first of several changes that D-M plans to improve relations with Tucsonans distressed by the base's decibel levels.

The measures were recommended last year by a civic committee that looked at ways to reduce neighborhood friction and increase good will, thereby helping to protect D-M's long-term viability.

In announcing the changes, D-M wing commander Col. Kent Laughbaum said military leaders recognize that they must operate differently from the way they did when Tucson was a small city whose boundaries were several miles from the air base.

"It's a different world today," he said. "In a city of 1 million people, we can't do business as we have in the past."

The biggest change involves the landing approach for A-10 aircraft and other military jets as they descend over the University of Arizona and Reid Park areas.

The jets traditionally have dropped to 1,500 feet at that point on their route. By staying at 2,000 feet, the noise level should drop by about 4.5 decibels, base officials said.

While that's not a huge change, it's enough so people on the ground "will hear a difference," Laughbaum said.

Civilian acoustics experts contacted by the Arizona Daily Star agreed that the change will have a noticeable impact.

"It will be a little quieter," said Mark Miceli, an acoustics engineer at Architectural Design Associates, a Tucson architectural and acoustical consulting firm. The level of noise reduction will vary depending on factors such as the amount of cloud cover, Miceli said.

Thomas Spendiarian, who is with the same consulting firm, said the human ear can perceive noise changes above 3 decibels, so the 4.5-decibel reduction promised by D-M "would sound noticeably different" to the average person. The new altitude rules will apply both to D-M pilots and to foreign pilots who train in Tucson during the winter, base officials said.

D-M averages about 80 flights a day. Most are A-10s, because the base is the main training center for the jets, which provide close air support for U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Other flight changes announced Wednesday involve the HH-60 Pave Hawk rescue helicopters that fly from D-M.

Westbound helicopters formerly flew along Aviation Parkway to 22nd Street, then stayed over 22nd Street as they headed out of the city. They now will travel along Ajo Way to Interstate 10, then turn west at 22nd Street to leave the city.

Wednesday's changes were praised as a positive step for Tucsonans heavily affected by jet noise, often referred to by military supporters as "the sound of freedom."

Thomas Bever, a UA professor of cognitive science, said he's looking forward to fewer interruptions during class.

"If this reduces noise over the university, that is excellent," he said. "At times, it is horrendous. Classes often had to stop because no one could hear and no one could think when the jets were overhead."

Helen Bayly, who lives about a mile east of the university, said she was "delighted" by the change in flight rules and hopes someday the base also will consider moving some flights away from the city altogether.

Laughbaum said he's still studying many of the two dozen recommendations made last year by the Military Community Compatibility Committee. The recommendations also include improving communications between D-M and the public, and redirecting some pilot-training activities — such as repeated touch-and-go landings — to airfields at Fort Huachuca or Gila Bend.

Laughbaum said he's willing to implement any ideas that are workable but is limited in what he can change at D-M because of potential conflicts with passenger jets at nearby Tucson International Airport. Pilot safety and public protection must come first, above noise considerations, he said.

Still, he said, "I think at the end of the day, when we've taken all these actions, people will be very happy."

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