

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

July 28, 2008

The Honorable Michael B. Donley  
Acting Secretary  
Department of the Air Force  
Room 4E540  
1670 Air Force  
The Pentagon, 20330-1670

Dear Acting Secretary Donley:

We write to express our concerns about the Air Force's proposal to expand the Ellsworth AFB and Minot AFB bomber training airspace into large areas of southeastern Montana, known as the Powder River Training Complex (PRTC). The airspace expansion would negatively impact the quality of life for Montanans in a number of ways.

Southeastern Montana is one of the most rural areas of the state, populated by isolated ranching operations. To oversee their operations, many ranchers use small aircraft to fly over their property. Under the proposal, pilots flying small planes through previously unrestricted areas would have to gather information about Air Force training before taking off. Pilots flying out of the numerous small airstrips under the proposed airspace would be required to receive flight clearance before takeoff. In addition, general aviation in this area also involves medical emergency aircraft. Medical aircraft, both helicopter and fixed-wing, are critical in this part of the state. The expansion of the PRTC has the potential to delay or prevent these life-saving aircraft from fulfilling their mission.

Further, this proposal raises significant safety concerns. We are concerned that the use of live flare and chaff release would pose a significant fire hazard. During the summer months, wild fires pose enormous risk to the State of Montana, and often require deployment of state and local fire fighting assets. As you know, the Forest Service has expressed in town meetings its concern over the potential wildfire risk that flares would pose. We strongly believe that the State of Montana and local land owners must not be subjected to this potential hazard.

There are also environmental concerns that would result from the Ellsworth proposal. Although the Environmental Impact Statement on the PRTC will provide a clearer picture of the environmental impact on eastern Montana, there is no question that the increased air traffic will create a substantial amount of noise pollution. Flights that break the sound barrier and fly as low as 500 ft above ground level will stress livestock, wildlife and humans.

The proposed PRTC expansion will negatively impact the residents of southeastern Montana. It will make life more difficult for Montana's farmers and ranchers, and a part of our big sky will be lost forever.

Given these numerous concerns, we strongly urge you to withdraw this airspace expansion proposal into Montana. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,



Senator Max Baucus



Senator Jon Tester