

Arizona Daily Star

July 17, 2005

Reports help show why Ft. Huachuca, D-M won't expand

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ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Southern Arizona's military bases did not emerge as the superstars many had predicted they would when the Pentagon recently rated the value of the nation's defense facilities, federal reports show.

Tucson's Davis-Monthan Air Force Base received lackluster grades for future growth potential and Fort Huachuca, in Sierra Vista, was tagged for its water supply problem in reports compiled as part of the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure process, known as BRAC.

The ratings may help explain why the bases were bypassed for expansion - contrary to what supporters expected - in the Defense Department effort to restructure the military.

"When I looked at those scores, I thought D-M kind of came out mediocre," said Gene Santarelli, a retired Air Force three-star general and former D-M commander who now advises Tucson City Hall on military matters.

Growth at the Tucson base now seems unlikely in the foreseeable future, he said - and if it does one day occur, it may be in a much different form from what he and others have pictured.

Sierra Vista City Manager Chuck Potucek, who touted Fort Huachuca's growth potential before the BRAC an-

nouncement in May, now says expansion probably won't happen unless the municipality can supplement its water supply - an expensive proposition that could take years.

"It's difficult to envision any large-scale mission growth until more of the water issues are resolved here," Potucek said.

Despite major conservation efforts, critics say the fort and the city of Sierra Vista are consuming water at a rate that threatens the nearby San Pedro River, a habitat for endangered species and millions of migrating songbirds that roost along its banks each year.

The Defense Department is Southern Arizona's largest employer, providing nearly 21,000 military and civilian jobs at D-M and Fort Huachuca, with an estimated yearly economic impact of about \$2.6 billion.

Civic officials, base boosters and some independent experts had predicted a boom in local military presence on the heels of BRAC. They envisioned thousands more troops and dozens more aircraft being moved here as bases elsewhere were closed or downsized.

In formal pitches to the Pentagon, D-M supporters proposed that the military create "centers of excellence" in Tucson for combat search-and-rescue operations and close air support. Fort Huachuca supporters asked for more unmanned aerial vehicle and military intelligence

training and that the Pentagon move its foreign language school there, from Monterey, Calif.

The Defense Department didn't bite on any of those ideas. Instead, D-M stayed as is and Fort Huachuca lost 167 civilian jobs, leaving the region's military landscape virtually unchanged.

The Pentagon's BRAC recommendations, which proposed closing 33 major bases and realigning dozens of others in a multibillion-dollar cost-cutting move, are being reviewed by an independent commission with a final decision due by fall. Military personnel aren't allowed to comment on the changes.

Military value rankings for local bases were prepared by the Army and the Air Force to lay the groundwork for the BRAC recommendations.

D-M was one of 157 Air Force installations - including active duty, reserve and peripheral sites such as the U.S. Air Force Academy - that were ranked for compatibility with eight missions, from space operations to combat search and rescue.

D-M's overall rankings ranged from a high of 11th place for tanker operations to a low of 35th place for airlift operations. The rankings generally were helped by high marks for the physical condition of facilities.

But in the future growth category, D-M

scored 60 percent or lower in every mission area reviewed. The growth potential ratings looked at factors such as the amount of aircraft parking space and availability of nearby land for future base expansion.

David Sorenson, a professor of national security studies at the Air Force's Air War College in Alabama who wrote a book about previous BRAC rounds in the 1990s, said urban encroachment likely worked against D-M when the service surveyed the growth potential of its bases.

Like many military cities, Tucson's city limits once ended miles from D-M, but the city virtually surrounds the base now.

State and city officials recently moved to protect D-M's busiest flight corridor by banning home building and some other land uses. There are ongoing efforts to ease tensions with neighbors, too. But D-M still logged the most noise complaints of the state's five major bases last year - 286 people made 485 complaints.

Sorenson said that sort of friction, while not severe enough to shutter the base, likely gave the Pentagon pause when it looked at candidates for growth.

"Urban encroachment at places like D-M and Luke (Air Force Base near Phoenix) would be one of the big factors in why there are limitations on expansion," Sorenson said.

Luke is to lose nearly 280 jobs under BRAC proposals, the bulk of the 550 military jobs to be cut in Arizona. Luke's future growth scores were lower than D-M's, ranging from a low of 26.4 to a high of 46.9.

Santarelli said the Pentagon seemed to give higher marks to air bases located near water - where the military does supersonic jet training - than to bases near ground ranges such as D-M and Luke, which train pilots at the Barry M.

Goldwater Range, west of Tucson.

Fort Huachuca's value ratings are harder to decipher.

The Army ranked the fort 21st overall of 97 installations nationwide. But the reasons weren't immediately clear in the service's BRAC report, which contained more than 80 acronyms and weighting formulas so complex that, according to one defense analyst, some communities targeted for closings have hired calculus experts to help fight the shutdowns.

One thing is clear: The Pentagon is concerned about the water supply issues that have prompted a string of environmental lawsuits against the fort and related agencies.

"Increased missions may result in additional water restrictions or mitigation requirements at Fort Huachuca," one BRAC report noted.

Lilly Goren, a political-science professor at Lake Forest College near Chicago, who also wrote a book on earlier rounds of base closings, said Fort Huachuca's water issues would have been a deal killer for the Defense Department when it decided which bases could take on more military personnel.

"They have to be sure, if they're pulling people out of Massachusetts or northern Virginia and moving them to Arizona, that the move is going to be supportable," she said.

The fact that Arizona is a fast-growing state with rising urban land prices probably worked against military expansion as well, experts said.

Santarelli, the city of Tucson's military adviser, said there's still a chance D-M could pick up new missions in future years, but perhaps not in its current war-plane operations.

Based on the recent BRAC rankings, D-

M might be seen as better suited for missions such as unmanned-aerial-vehicle operations or intelligence and surveillance work, he said.

Potucek, Sierra Vista's city manager, said even if no military growth occurs, Southern Arizona is still fortunate that existing bases survived.

"When you go through such a high-stakes process and you escape relatively unscathed, you've got to be happy about that."