

Thune Applauds Air Force Selection of Ellsworth for New Mission

Permanent Mission to Add 280 Personnel

June 21st, 2010 - RAPID CITY, SD - Senator John Thune today announced that the Air Force has selected Ellsworth Air Force Base as one of two new squadron bed-down locations for personnel operating Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA). This new addition is part of a broader effort to increase the number of MQ-1 Predator and MQ-9 Reaper intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance combat air patrols operating over Afghanistan and Iraq. The Air Force currently operates 41 RPA orbits, 24 hours a day, seven days a week in support of the Global War on Terror.

"Ellsworth Air Force Base and the Rapid City community is the perfect location for this new mission," said Thune. "Ellsworth's B-1 bombers have been providing on-call close air support to troops in Afghanistan with outstanding success. With this new mission, the men and women of Ellsworth will continue that tradition by providing real-time intelligence information to those same troops." Thune said.

Since the Air Force announced that Ellsworth was a leading contender to host the new mission, Senator Thune, who serves on the Senate Armed Services Committee, spoke directly with high-level Defense Department and Air Force officials to promote Ellsworth's unique advantages for the mission, both in person and by telephone. He led the South Dakota congressional delegation in sending a letter to Air Force Chief of Staff General Norton Schwartz and Secretary of the Air Force Michael Donley promoting the base, and he followed up on that letter with direct telephone conversations. In addition, Senator Thune hosted a video teleconference with Rapid City community leaders, elected officials, and economic development groups, including the Ellsworth Task Force and the Ellsworth Development Authority.

Ellsworth will be responsible for flying five unmanned air patrols per day, providing vital intelligence information to commanders and troops on the ground. The squadron should be in place by January 2012 and will perform what's known as remote split operations, meaning the aircraft will be controlled from Ellsworth but no actual planes will be stationed there.

It takes hundreds of people to operate and support this new mission. This decision will bring approximately 280 new active duty airmen, Air Force civilians, contractor personnel, plus their families, to Ellsworth and the Rapid City area.

Two of the primary reasons the Air Force selected Ellsworth as the bed down location from among over 200 potential locations nationwide is the infrastructure provided by the Air Force Financial Services Center and the available space that exists at Ellsworth. In 2008, Ellsworth installed a high-capacity communications system to support the Financial Services Center. This same 10-Gigabyte fiber network will enable the new RPA operations to not only communicate with the remote aircraft, but also rapidly disseminate intelligence information to users around the world.

This new squadron is part of an ongoing build-up of operations in order to meet the Air Force goal of 65 orbits by the end of the fiscal year 2013. The Air Force plans to announce three more squadrons along with potential bed down locations as early as August.

Senator Thune is the ranking member of the Senate Armed Services Committee's AirLand Subcommittee and is also on the Senate Armed Services Committee's Readiness Subcommittee which has oversight responsibility for basing and infrastructure matters.

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