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D-M again raises jets' altitude to quell noise

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For the second time this year, Davis-Monthan Air Force Base is upping the altitude of military jets to decrease the decibel level over Tucson.

On Monday, base officials announced a new round of changes to flight operations, this time adding another 500 to 800 feet to the height at which its aircraft travel over the city center as they prepare to land.

When both sets of changes are taken together, they amount to an 86 percent increase in altitude, base officials said.

D-M's wing commander, Col. Kent Laughbaum, said he's making good on a pledge he made when he arrived at the base last summer.

"My promise when I took command is that I would do everything I could" to reduce aircraft noise, Laughbaum said, as long as it could be done safely and without compromising pilot training.

The changes, which took effect Monday, make D-M something of an oddity among Air Force bases. Jets at most U.S. bases fly at 1,500 feet above ground level during landing patterns, Laughbaum said.

In March, D-M raised the altitude of its aircraft from 1,500 to 2,000 feet through the city center during daylight hours.

The latest change increases that to 2,800 feet in the main flight corridor above Speedway, with a gradual descent to about 2,500 feet in the area between Reid Park and the University of Arizona.

Jets then will drop to about 2,300 feet near South Country Club Road and East 22nd Street, and again to 1,500 feet when they're three miles from D-M's runway.

Residents of the Rita Ranch area southeast of D-M also will get a break on noise. Aircraft landing over that neighborhood also will stay at 2,300 feet until shortly before landing, then drop to 1,500 feet.

The graduated descents will allow jets to use less engine power on approach, which should cut noise even further, Laughbaum said.

Base officials estimated in March that the first round of changes would decrease noise over the city center by about 4.5 decibels, a modest but noticeable change.

There was no similar decibel calculation in Monday's announcement, but Laughbaum said it's reasonable to expect more improvement with 500 to 800 extra feet of altitude.

A D-M spokeswoman, 2nd Lt. Mary Pekas, said the base already has seen a dramatic drop in noise complaints since the initial altitude increase in March.

D-M had 133 noise complaints between March and June this year. Last year, there were 230 during the same time period, Pekas said.

Tucson City Councilwoman Nina Trasoff, who represents Midtown's Ward 6, parts of which are directly under the D-M flight path, said Monday's announcement should be welcome news for residents most affected by military noise.

"I am hoping they will notice a marked difference. I've already noticed the difference myself when I'm out in my yard," she said. "I'm very pleased with what the base has done."

The idea of adding altitude to reduce jet noise was one of two dozen recommendations made last year by the Military Community Compatibility Committee, which looked at ways D-M could improve relations with Tucson residents.

The air base has made other changes in response to that report, such as changing some helicopter routes and improving communications with a bigger Web presence and online complaint forms.

Laughbaum said he isn't stopping there. Base officials are looking at other changes, such as the creation of a southeastern departure route for helicopter traffic, and setting up a community outreach team.

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