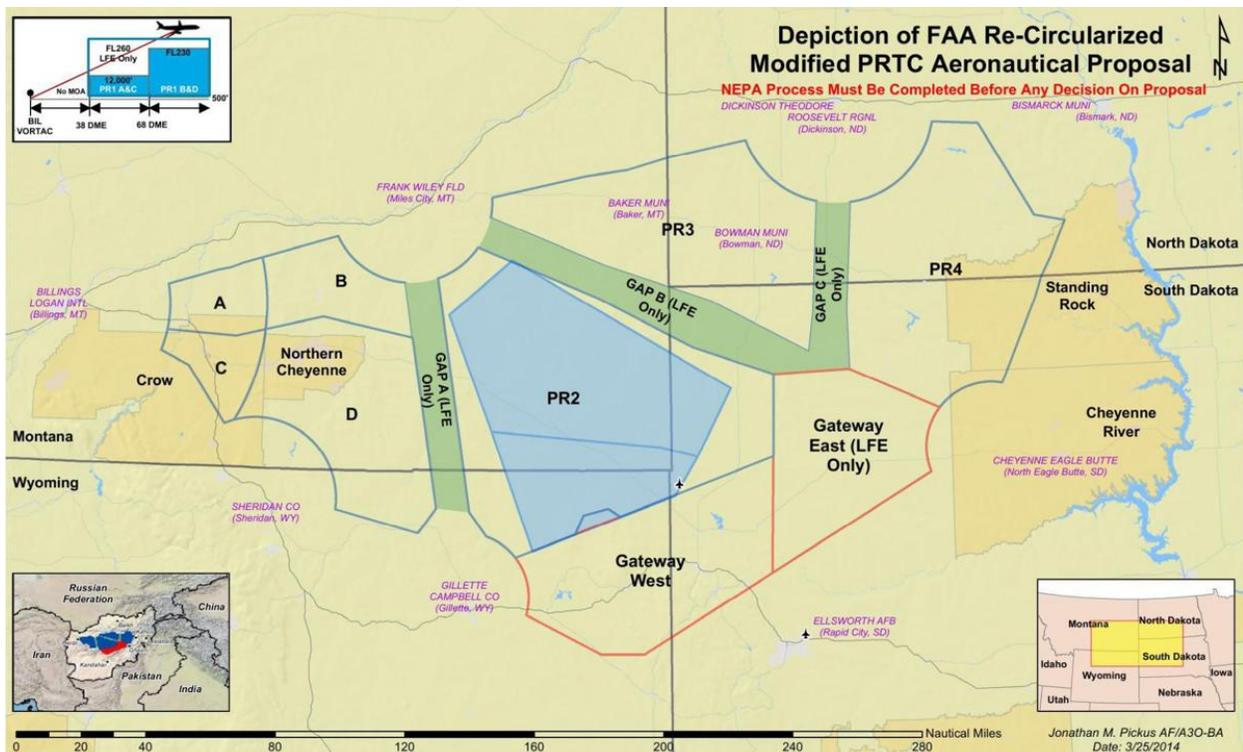


Air Force training reaches new height

Bombers, tankers and air command center planes finished the Air Force's first large-scale training exercise in the newly expanded Powder River Training Complex (PRTC) on Thursday and, according to Sen. John Thune, there are more to come.

In a sit down Thursday at the Rapid City Journal office, Thune said he hopes this week's training that included B-1, B-2 and B-52 bombers, E-3 and E-8s radar/command center sentries, and tankers is the start of bi-annual training exercises in what has become the largest training airspace in the continental United States.

Earlier this year, PRTC — a 35,000-square mile swath of air space in the western Dakotas, southeast Montana and northeast Wyoming — was granted a waiver from the Federal Aviation Administration doubling the altitude from 26,000 feet to 52,000 feet that the Air Force could occupy during certain training activities.



The expansion, which covers 28,000 square miles of the complex, allows the military's detection-evading stealth aircraft — including the B-2 Spirit bomber, F-35 Lightning fighter-bomber and F-22 Raptor fighter — to train at the normal operating altitudes it flies at during combat missions. It also, according to Thune, secures Ellsworth Air Force Base's status in the force's future plans.

“That is the best thing we possibly could have done to secure the base's future,” Thune said of the altitude expansion. “How long is that for? I don't know. But I know that training ranges, training space comes at a real premium and we have a ton of it.” Getting the FAA waiver for altitude expansion was a decade-long “battle,” Thune added. The next step, he said, was securing a long-term agreement for altitude expansion to allow for large-scale training exercises in PRTC every fall and spring.

“I hope we can strike a balance so that this becomes a real long-term opportunity for training because I think it will lead to all kinds of other types of air assets coming in here for operations,” Thune said.

One of the biggest air assets includes the incoming B-21 bombers, a stealth strategic bomber currently under development by Northrop Grumman that will eventually replace B-1 and B-2 bombers. The Air Force's goal is to build 100 B-21s, with Ellsworth and two other bases — Whiteman AFB in Missouri and Dyess AFB in Texas — as the likely recipients.

Thune said the question isn't if Ellsworth receives the bombers, but how many and when. Given that the first B-21 squadron would be a training squadron and Ellsworth is the gateway to PRTC, Thune said he hoped Ellsworth would receive some of the first bombers off Grumman's production line.

“We think the base is really well-positioned,” he said.

Details of the contract with Grumman for design, engineering and production of B-21s have been kept secret but [some estimate it is close to \\$80 billion](#). Thune said infrastructure upgrades to Ellsworth to prepare for the incoming bombers is also expected.

“It will be a nuclear platform, so it will require some weapons storage facilities that we don't currently have,” he said.

Increasing the base's data storage capabilities and securing more backup energy sources were also among the upgrades Thune said were necessary.

If and when the base receives B-21s, it's expected there will be a 20 to 30 year overlap where B-1s and B-2s will still be present and in use at the base.

As for the base's 89th Attack Squadron, which has remotely piloted the force's MQ-9A Reaper drones in overseas operations since 2011, Thune said he hopes the program at Ellsworth will expand in the future. About 300 airmen currently work in the base's program.

But for now, reaper drones hovering above South Dakota and within the PRTC seems off the board.

“We've talked about that,” said Thune, adding that he doesn't see it happening “right now.” Convincing the FAA to expand the altitude for a few days of Air Force training was hard enough, he made clear. Convincing them to allow unmanned aircraft in its air space is a whole different challenge.

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