

OURS

OURS: Hard work pays dividends for base supporters

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Two U.S. Air Force B-1B Lancer bombers assigned to the 37th Expeditionary Bomb Squadron, deployed from Ellsworth AFB, South Dakota, fly alongside a Koku Jieitai (Japan Air Self-Defense Force) F-2s over the vicinity of the East China Sea, Oct. 21, 2017.

Photo courtesy Koku Jieitai (Japan Air Self-Defense Force)

It was an announcement on May 13, 2005, that brought a sense of shock and awful to the Rapid City area. The Department of Defense was considering closing Ellsworth Air Force Base, which would have blown a huge hole in the economy of the region.

The base — and 32 others — was on the BRAC closure list after being part of the nation's national defense system for 64 years. The Air Force estimated that closing Ellsworth would save it around \$1.8 billion. There was only a 12 percent chance of any of the bases on the list staying open, according to BRAC.

The state then did what any good military organization should do: It mobilized and fought to keep the base in western South Dakota. The state's congressional delegation, including newly elected Sen. Thune, the governor's office, local officials and later the South Dakota Ellsworth Development Authority took on the challenge to convince the Department of Defense that it erred in putting Ellsworth on the termination list.

The last 13 years of hard work and the area's unwavering support for the 28th Bomber Wing and its B1-Lancers have paid off in a substantial way. On Monday, the Air Force announced the base would be a future home of the B-21 bombers that are expected to be flying missions in the mid-2020s.

The fact that the Air Force base on the outskirts of Box Elder will continue to play a key role in this country's national defense is a source of pride in the area. The B1-Lancer and its crews have been playing a critical role in the war on terror and recently helped send a message to North Korea that there will be serious consequences in the event the nation follows through on threats to launch a nuclear missile.

The economic benefits of the base, meanwhile, are staggering for the region and state. Here's just a few numbers from 2017 that show its annual impact:

- Military pay: \$191.3 million
- Military personnel: 3,196
- Dependents: 6,331
- Civilian pay: \$44.8 million
- Civilian jobs: 1,095
- Expenditures: \$59 million
- Economic impact: \$359 million.

Congratulations to all those who worked to help keep Ellsworth Air Force Base a key part of the national defense strategy. In this case, what's good for the country is good for western South Dakota.