

Colorado ranks No. 4 in net gain

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By PAM ZUBECK THE GAZETTE

Colorado would see the fourth-largest gain among the 50 states, boosting military employment in the state by 4,917, under Pentagon base closure recommendations released Friday.

The largest portion of the gain would add 4,377 troops and civilians to Fort Carson with the reassignment of a unit from Fort Hood, Texas. An additional 3,762-person unit with temporary orders to Carson would make the Army post its permanent home under plans to shuffle overseas units.

The plans are part of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's proposal to shut more than 150 military installations from Maine to Hawaii, including 33 major bases. The changes would result in a net loss of 29,005 military and civilian jobs. The overhaul would save taxpayers \$48.8 billion over 20 years and make the military more mobile and better suited for the global war on terrorism, Rumsfeld said.

Net losses would be seen in 29 states, and the others would post gains — including Colorado, whose proposed increase is exceeded only by gains in Maryland, Georgia and Texas.

The Pentagon's recommendations will be taken up by the Base Realignment and Closure Commission in hearings this summer. It's not likely the list will change much, because to add a base for closure requires seven of the nine members' approval.

The commission will deliver recommendations to President Bush by Sept. 8. He'll forward the list with his approval to Congress or send it back to the commission. If Congress approves it, closings and redeployments would begin in 2006 and finish within six years.

The proposed cuts are viewed as deep by Brett Lambert, a defense analyst at DFI International in Washington, D.C.

"They took much more Draconian measures in steps to support the war fighter at the cost of the politician," he said.

He said joint operations and positioning the National Guard and Reserves for active duty are key. Dozens of guard and reserve facilities nationwide are tagged for closure, which Lambert sees as a step toward integrating the units with active-duty forces.

Rumsfeld's proposal calls for Peterson Air Force Base to gain 510 people from the 302nd Airlift Wing from Dyess Air Force Base, Texas. The unit would bring four C-130 transport planes, and it would merge with elements of the unit already here. The unit is a mix of active-duty and reserve troops, who have a variety of missions, including supporting Fort Carson.

The change could reinstate four planes the unit was due to lose. Under a force reduction plan from last year, the Peterson unit was to lose four of its 16 planes. One has been removed.

"We were going down, and now we're potentially staying the same," said wing spokesman Lt. Col. Clancy Preston.

Buckley Air Force Base in Denver would gain 94 positions and Schriever Air Force Base 95.

Local losses would be 11 people from leased government space in Colorado Springs; 108 from the Air Reserve Personnel Center (Buckley Annex), who would be relocated to Randolph Air Force Base in San Antonio; and 40 Air Force Academy hospital personnel moved to Fort Carson.

"I think Colorado did well, and the Colorado Springs area did very well, because Fort Carson did very well," said Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colo.

"The Army is becoming more and more vital in this war on terrorism, because of their mobility and high-tech training in the field," he said. "We can send a few soldiers in, and with air support they can control the battlefield."

Rep. Joel Hefley, R-Colo., said the gains might make area bases bulletproof from future cutbacks.

"Ten years ago we were on the bubble, and they were talking about closing a maneuver base," Hefley said. "This year there wasn't that kind of feeling that Fort Carson was going to close, although you never know for sure. I think it says a great deal about the confidence the Army has in Fort Carson as a permanent base."

He said Peterson's future security is "intricately tied" to Carson because it provides airlift for the post. Peterson's small gain may have disappointed some area officials who had hoped the Air Force Space Command would absorb operations of the Space and Missile Center in Los Angeles. The California base wasn't stamped for closure.

State and local agencies paid DFI International \$200,000 last year to assess the best location for the Space and Missile Center if it closed. The study ranked Peterson as potentially the best site.

Rocky Scott, Greater Colorado Springs Economic Development Corp. president, said he was "a little disappointed," because the center would have brought 8,000 people, many of them high-earning engineers and scientists who "would have changed the flavor of the community."

Now, Scott said, the EDC's plan to hire a consultant to assess what's needed to handle the influx may be curtailed.

Still, more than 8,000 new Army jobs will pump hundreds of millions annually into the area economy, he said, and help fill vacant rentals.

"You're talking about a lot of money," he said. "Go find the people renting apartments, and you'll find some very happy people."

Colorado Springs Mayor Lionel Rivera, a former Army captain who served three years at Fort Carson, was delighted with the idea of getting more soldiers and securing Peterson's airlift wing.

The mayor said the city is the "best prepared community in the country" for growth.

But county transportation chief John McCarty and Fountain officials are concerned about adequate roads in the area around the post.

The Rural Transportation Authority, approved by voters last year, could speed plans to improve Drennan Road from the Colorado Springs Airport to Highway 115 near Fort Carson, he said.

Hefley noted a nagging problem for Fort Carson is the encroachment of housing. A community called Rancho Colorado, east of the post and near the Pueblo County line, borders Carson.

Although El Paso County officials approved a road plan in early 2004, four months later they blocked formation of a water district after Fort Carson advised against it.

Hefley is seeking \$30 million in the defense bill to buy land around the post and protect it from development.

AIR FORCE ACADEMY



Today
8,700
Projected
8,660
-40

PETERSON AIR FORCE BASE



Today
9,900
Projected
10,410
+510

SCHRIEVER AIR FORCE BASE



Today
5,200
Projected
5,295
+95



FORT CARSON

Today: **15,854**
Projected: **23,993**

+ 4,377
Announced Friday

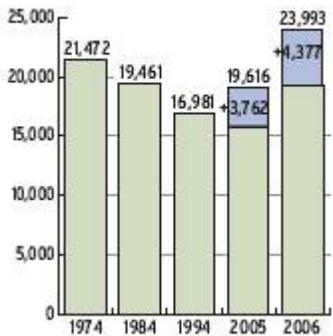
+ 3,762
Announced previously

+ 8,139
TOTAL GAIN

GRAPHIC BY ANDY ROHRBACK, THE GAZETTE; PHOTOS FROM THE GAZETTE FILE Source: Defense Department

Active-duty personnel

The number of soldiers at Fort Carson declined from 1974 to last year. This week's base closure report recommends adding more troops, likely beginning in 2006.



SOURCE: Fort Carson THE GAZETTE