

Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission

EARLY



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Authorization Bill's Delay Might Alter Thune's BRAC Plans

Congress Daily

Megan Scully

July 27, 2005

The Senate's decision Tuesday to hold up indefinitely consideration of the FY06 defense authorization bill might move consideration of an amendment to delay military base closures until after the independent commission reviewing the Pentagon's recommendations completes its work.

If the bill is not considered until after the August recess, it might change somewhat the makeup and resolve of lawmakers supporting South Dakota Republican Sen. John Thune's language to push back base closures until the Pentagon completes several sweeping reviews and most troops return from Iraq.

Thune told reporters last week that he would prefer debating the amendment after the Base Closure and Realignment Commission finishes its analysis and recommendations, due to the White House Sept. 8. Once the moves are finalized, he said, affected members would be more mobilized than ever to delay the round.

His office reiterated those remarks Tuesday.

"Everybody is operating under the knowledge that their base may be taken off the list," said spokesman Alex Conant. "Once the list comes

out, it strengthens the resolve that this is the final option."

Thune might lose some of his most ardent supporters if the commission opts to overturn recommendations to close specific installations, sources said. However, he also might gain new support from a handful of lawmakers who represent bases the commission decided to add to its list of closure and realignment considerations.

One BRAC consultant voiced skepticism that the Thune amendment would pass, whether it is debated before or after recess. Similar attempts failed this spring in the House.

"Will there be the political will to do that?" the consultant asked. "Not unless ... there is some stuff that goes on that is so egregious that the political folks say this is not how it should have been handled."

Technically, Congress could delay or otherwise alter the BRAC process at any point, even after the commission forwards its recommendations to the White House, sources said.

After less than a week of debate, the Senate put the defense bill on hold Tuesday, turning instead to consideration of a gun-liability measure despite protests from Democrats who complained that Republicans were prioritizing "special-interest" legislation over military readiness. The National Rifle Association supports the gun-liability bill.

At presstime, Republican leadership had not formally determined when the Senate would again consider the defense bill.

But Armed Services Chairman Warner said the defense authorization would be called to the floor again in September. He plans to meet today with the committee's staff director to devise a way ahead, a congressional source said.

Warner supported a cloture petition pushed by Majority Leader Frist that would have limited debate on the authorization bill and moved it to a vote by Wednesday night. When cloture failed, the Senate voted to consider immediately the gun-liability legislation.

The cloture petition fell 10 votes short of the required two-thirds majority, with Thune and six other Republicans breaking ranks, largely because of concerns that it would have

prevented debate on the BRAC language and other controversial amendments.

Delaying the bill's passage beyond the recess will affect the Senate Appropriations Committee's schedule.

Appropriations Chairman Cochran said Tuesday he intends to stick by his plan to wait until after the defense authorization passes before marking up the defense spending bill. He added that he would be watching the calendar.

"We have to complete that bill by Sept. 30; we have to avoid a continuing resolution," Cochran said, arguing that such a scenario would severely affect Pentagon budget-planners. "It's a matter of national security."

House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman C.W. (Bill) Young, R-Fla., said yanking the defense authorization measure from the Senate floor "slows us down a bit."

But once the Senate acts "we'll conference pretty quickly," he added. "We know how to conference bills and get things moving."

For The Record

Washington Post
July 27, 2005

On behalf of Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.), Senate Majority Leader Frist has written to two members of the base closing commission, asking them to closely scrutinize the Pentagon's recommendation to close Ellsworth Air Force Base in Rapid City, S.D. "He doesn't regularly do this, but he did visit South Dakota last year and he feels like he has worked with the people of Ellsworth," said Amy Call, a spokeswoman for Frist. "He committed to Senator Thune as well that he would" write the letters. Thune defeated Senate minority leader Thomas A. Daschle (D-S.D.) last November, in part by saying that his clout with the majority Republicans would help to save Ellsworth.

National Guard adjutants urge BRAC not to close or realign Air Guard units

Copley News Service (Springfield, IL)
Chris Wetterich

July 26, 2006

A group representing the nation's adjutants general - the head of each state's National Guard - has urged the Base Realignment and Closure Commission not to close or realign any Air National Guard units, as the Pentagon has recommended.

In a letter dated Monday to BRAC chairman Anthony Principi, the group said the Defense Department's recommendations fall outside the authority of the BRAC process.

"A 'realignment' under the Base Closure Act pertains to installations, not to units, unit equipment, people or positions," wrote Maj. Gen. Roger Lempke of Nebraska on behalf of the Adjutants General Association of the United States.

He quoted a memo by the commission's deputy general counsel that said: "The purpose of the act is to close or realign excess real estate and improvements that create unnecessary drain on the resources of the Department of Defense. The Base Closure Act is not a vehicle to effect changes in how a unit is equipped or organized."

"The adjutants general believe the proposed recommended actions are beyond the scope of the Base Closure Act and it would therefore be improper for the BRAC Commission to include these actions in its recommendations to the president and the Congress," Lempke wrote.

Lempke proposed that the Air Force and the adjutant generals discuss the placement of Air National Guard bases outside of the BRAC process. He said the group has a plan that would provide for an Air Guard flying unit in every state and air defense protection for all regions in the continental United States. The letter did not provide further details.

Lempke said the group had set up a subcommittee to discuss the issue further with the Air Force.

In congressional testimony, the Air Force has defended its recommended realignment or

closure of about 30 Air National Guard bases, including the 183rd Fighter Wing in Springfield. Eighty-three percent of the Air Force's recommendations have to do with the Air Guard. The Air Force says its squadrons need to be larger than they currently are.

The adjutant generals' letter is the latest assault on the Pentagon's expansive plan for realignment of Air National Guard units. Two states, Illinois and Pennsylvania, have sued the Pentagon alleging that it has no right to move or change the composition of units without the approval of a state's governor.

The legal counsel for the U.S. House has also said the proposed moves are legally questionable.

The Pentagon maintains that its recommendations are legal and has asked the BRAC commissioners to wait to take action until U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales' office weighs in.

(OPTIONAL TRIM)

If the BRAC Commission agrees with the adjutants general, the 183rd Fighter Wing at Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport and its 15 active F-16s and 163 full-time personnel would be knocked off the Pentagon's realignment list.

The Defense Department recommended Springfield's planes and personnel be sent to an Air Guard base at Fort Wayne International Airport in Indiana.

(END OPTIONAL TRIM)

BRAC commissioners have until Sept. 8 to review the Pentagon's suggested moves and deliver a final report to President Bush, who has until Sept. 23 to accept or reject it. Congress then has 45 days to accept or reject the report.

The commission is expected to make its final decisions by the end of August.

Local News Articles

Norco Base Is Facing Closure Issues

While the Navy facility's end isn't definite, workers weigh their options: relocating, long commute or finding new jobs.

Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles, CA)

Stephanie Ramos, Times Staff Writer

July 27, 2005

If the Naval Surface Warfare Center in Norco is closed by the Pentagon in November, Patty Pfouts will have a long haul ahead of her.

The military has proposed moving the weapons research facility to the Naval Air Weapons Station at Point Mugu in Ventura County, and the 42-year-old Norco native said she can't afford to move her family. So she'll have to commute 230 miles a day.

"I just can't afford not to," she says.

Pfouts is one of the 1,800 workers whose paychecks depend on Naval Surface Warfare Center Corona Division, locally known as "Norco," for the small equestrian town in which it resides.

Norco is one of 62 communities nationwide — including 25 in California — that are starting to grapple with the changes a closure can bring, even as they lobby to keep their bases open. When it appeared in May on the list of sites recommended for relocation in the current round of military downsizing, it wasn't the first time. Ten years ago, during the last major round of post-Cold War closures, the base was on the list.

Although the closure is not definite, the employees, scientists and engineers who test the value and efficiency of weapons before the Navy purchases them in bulk have been through this before.

Pfouts, an engineering technician, is one. She is a 19-year employee of Computer Services Corp., a contracted electronics services company involved in nearly every division of the base. The company has about 300 employees at Norco.

Pfouts said her husband already makes a 45-minute commute to the City of Industry, where he is a warehouse manager, and her two college-age children live at home and attend area schools. She wouldn't want to make any of them move to Ventura County, even if she could afford the higher housing prices.

"My other daughter lives in Riverside with my grandchild and another one on the way; I'm not going to move away from them," she said.

Karen Curp, 50, has spent 16 years at the company, living one block from the base. She said the housing market in Ventura County is out of reach for her family. The current median price of a home in Riverside County is \$393,000, and the Ventura County median is \$584,000.

"I can't afford to move. It's just too expensive. My husband has a job here, and he obviously makes more than me. I have a kid in college and another in school, and I can't move them either," she said.

Rep. Ken Calvert (R-Corona) has been working behind the scenes in Washington to keep the base active.

"Especially now in a time of war, it is not the right thing to do," Calvert said. "Plus, in my mind, it's a recommendation that's trying to fix a problem that does not exist. It's the least cost-saving of all the [recommended closures] in the country."

According to the Navy's estimates, closing the base would save about \$400,000 over 20 years. The facilities at Norco were upgraded 10 years ago, and Calvert and Norco base proponents say that the Point Mugu site has nothing comparable, requiring the building of a weapons analysis site at a minimum cost of \$40 million.

"So, it's actually going to cost them money to move the base," Calvert said. "If it doesn't save money and it doesn't help the national defense of the country, why do it?"

Roberta Spieler, spokeswoman for the Norco base, said the base's position is steadfast: "We're dedicated to follow through the [realignment and closure] process That's what we're about right now."

Many employees, however, are reluctant. Most have spent their careers at the Norco base, which the Navy purchased the day before Pearl Harbor was attacked in 1941.

Even newcomers, such as Mary Koster, 43, of Norco, a computer programmer who has been at the base for 1 1/2 years, are feeling the pressure.

"It's an awesome team of people," Koster said, "almost like a family. It'd be great to keep it here. I've worked [other jobs] for 20 years, and I don't think I've ever had such a good job with nice people."

Some Norco employees would willingly move to the larger naval base at Point Mugu.

Chester Franklin, 71, an 11-year Norco systems engineer with Computer Services Corp., said he would relocate, family and all. "I have changed jobs a lot, and I have moved a lot," he said. "Sometimes you just have to do it."

Franklin said the job itself was important: "I like what I do. The function of it is important, and the job is needed."

Base-closing official questions data justifying Nevada cuts

The Associated Press State & Local Wire
(Carson City, NV)
Brendan Riley
July 27, 2005

The chairman of a federal commission reviewing military bases facing possible closure said Tuesday he's concerned about the quality of information provided by the Pentagon to justify closures or cutbacks at two Nevada bases.

"There have been some issues about the quality of information," Anthony Principi said following tours of the Nevada Air National Guard Base in

Reno and a big Army ammunition depot in the small desert town of Hawthorne.

"I'm not sure I would use the word 'shocking' but obviously I'm concerned by what I've learned compared to what the military told us and we need to take that into consideration without question," the head of the federal Base Realignment and Closure Commission added.

Principi said there are more bombs and other ammunition stored at Hawthorne than the commission had realized - some 300,000 tons. He also mentioned accuracy of cost savings and the cost of relocating all the ammunition elsewhere.

While the Department of Defense had figured relocation costs at about \$383 million, Day & Zimmerman Hawthorne Corp., which operates the depot under contract from the Army, has put closure costs at \$1.46 billion.

Principi also said economic impact is an important consideration, and clearly the ammunition depot closure "would be devastating to the town of Hawthorne."

Local officials say base closure would result in the loss of about 1,200 jobs at the depot and elsewhere in the community about 130 miles south of Reno. That's two-thirds of all jobs in Mineral County, which encompasses Hawthorne.

Principi also repeated earlier comments supporting Air Guard activity around the nation, saying, "It's important that we have Air Guards and that they be in our communities, that the military and our communities are interrelated."

The commission also is still waiting for a Justice Department analysis of whether cutbacks or closures of Air Guard facilities without the consent of governors in affected states is legal, Principi said.

Mike Hillerby, chief of staff for Gov. Kenny Guinn, said Nevada hasn't joined in lawsuits launched by some other states over the legality issue, but has brought up that issue in dealings

with the BRAC. Signing onto that litigation is "one of the potentials," he added.

Guard Brig. Gen. Cindy Kirkland said that in her discussions Tuesday with Principi she got the impression that commissioners "really are trying to put the commonsense check on this process - and they're looking at the (Pentagon) recommendations and scratching their heads just like we are."

U.S. Rep. Jim Gibbons, R-Nev., who made the tour with Principi, said it's significant that the chairman of the nine-member BRAC came to Nevada. Principi's visit followed an early tour by commission member Philip Coyle.

Shelley Hartmann, director of Mineral County's economic development authority, said she's encouraged by Principi's mention of information discrepancies regarding the Army ammunition depot.

"But I'm not going to be encouraged completely until Aug. 22 when the commission votes" on its recommendations, she added.

The DOD has proposed removing C-130 transport plans in Reno. Guard commanders said that would leave them with only one set of C-130s west of the Rockies, based in the Los Angeles area.

The DOD's plan for Hawthorne would close a facility that has been operating for 75 years. Ammunition stored in 2,500 bunkers at the depot, which sprawls over 230 square miles, would be moved to the Tooele Army Depot near Salt Lake City.

Base closing commissioners tour Maine military facilities

The Associated Press State & Local Wire
(Kittery, ME)
Jerry Harkavay
July 27, 2005

Retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Sue Turner requested a low-key reception for her visit to Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. She didn't get it.

Though smaller than last month's rally for base closing commissioners, several hundred workers and supporters wearing T-shirts and led by bagpipes greeted Tuesday's arrival of Turner and former Transportation Secretary Samuel Skinner.

Afterward, Skinner joked that that "low-key is an oxymoron here." However, he suggested that the community's efforts to show support were not for naught.

"These things do make a difference. It shows the kind of support that a community has for its Navy," he said. "That's not true in all of the places we go."

Tuesday's visit, which also included a visit by Skinner and Turner to Brunswick Naval Air Station, means two-thirds of the nine-member panel deciding the fate of the Navy bases in Maine will have toured the two facilities.

If the Kittery shipyard closes, it would result in more than 4,500 job losses and a ripple effect through the Maine and New Hampshire economies.

Shipyard supporters contend there's enough submarine repair and overhaul work to keep all four existing public shipyards open. Of the four, Portsmouth is the most efficient, so it definitely makes no sense to close the yard, they say.

"Why would you close down a place like that?" said Tyler Foss, a 25-year shipyard worker from Dover, N.H. He noted that Portsmouth, unlike the others, always delivers submarines back to the Navy ahead of schedule and under budget.

Maine Gov. John Baldacci and New Hampshire Gov. John Lynch joined the commissioners at a news conference after their tour.

Turner was asked whether there is excess capacity in the public shipyards as the Navy contends. Portsmouth supporters contend there is no excess capacity, and eliminating the shipyard will cause delays and backlogs.

"I don't know yet," she said. "That's one of the things we're looking at. That's a real key point. But I couldn't tell you today."

The Brunswick station visit followed an 8-1 vote by the Base Realignment and Closure Commission to add it to the list of those under consideration for closure. The Pentagon originally proposed removing its aircraft and half of its personnel.

Adding the base to the closure list doesn't necessarily mean it will close, but it gives commissioners more options and flexibility in the decision-making process, Skinner said. In Brunswick's case, they could leave it open, close it or scale it back.

Supporters have argued that keeping the last active military airfield in New England open is vital to the national defense, and that it makes little sense to maintain an active duty airfield without airplanes as the Pentagon originally proposed.

If the base were scaled back, its planes would be sent to Jacksonville, Fla., and more than 2,300 jobs would be cut, representing roughly half the base's work force.

Rick Tetrev, chairman of the Brunswick Naval Air Station Task Force and a former second-in-command at the base, said he remains optimistic that the message is getting through to commissioners. Every base visit by commissioners gives supporters one more chance to make their case.

"We're not lawyers and we're not lobbyists," Tetrev said. "We can speak from our heart and with conviction."

In Brunswick, the commissioners said they asked pointed questions and that they'll use the information to help make a decision on the fate of the base.

"It's not fair to reach any preconclusions other than it's a great facility and there's a lot of support in the community," Skinner said.

Turner said it was helpful to get a firsthand look at the base.

"It was important to get up here and see it for myself, so I'm really glad we had the opportunity to do that," she said.

The commission will forward its final recommendations on hundreds of military installations nationwide to the president by Sept. 8. The president has until Sept. 23 to accept or reject the recommendations in their entirety.

If accepted, Congress has 45 legislative days to reject the recommendations in their entirety or they become binding.

From a whisper to a roar on Oceana

The Virginian Pilot (Hampton Roads, VA)
Kate Wiltout and Christina Nucklos
July 24, 2006

In a cavernous Senate committee room on Capitol Hill, Meyera Oberndorf's face went pale. A hundred miles away, in Richmond, shouts alerted Gov. Mark R. Warner to the news.

The federal commission charged with realigning the nation's military bases had just done something many people in Virginia convinced themselves wouldn't, couldn't, shouldn't happen: It had voted – 7 to 1 – to consider closing Oceana Naval Air Station in Virginia Beach.

Warner and the state's senior U.S. senator, John Warner – chairman of the armed services committee, former secretary of the Navy – had spoken by phone minutes before the vote Tuesday. Neither expected any surprises.

Then came the shout from William Leighty, the governor's chief of staff. He'd been watching the meeting via webcast in an adjacent office.

"I remember silence in the room for, like, one, two, three, four seconds," Gov. Warner's press secretary Kevin Hall recalled. "I believe I uttered an expletive. And then the governor said,

'Get Senator Warner on the phone and track down Meyera.'”

Within hours, news releases were flying, strategy sessions scheduled, reassurances uttered.

Still, the question loomed: How did this happen? How did Oceana escape the Pentagon's gaze in May, when Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld released his base closure recommendations, only to become one of eight last-minute additions to the commission's black list?

The Defense Base Realignment and Closure Commission insisted all along it wouldn't rubber-stamp the Pentagon's closure list. Now Oceana supporters believe it.

“If nothing else, this is a terrific wake-up call,” said Virginia Beach City Councilman Richard Maddox . “Up until now, there has been a sense that it could never happen. There's some threshold decisions we've got to make about what we're willing to do and what we're not willing to do to keep Oceana here.”

As one senior congressional staffer, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, observed: “This whole thing has taken an interesting turn.”

The commission had asked specifically about shifting Oceana's jets to Moody Air Force Base in Georgia, he noted, with the Pentagon replying that nothing in the inventory met the needs of Oceana.

“The commission just doesn't believe them,” the staffer said.

On one level, the surprise came at the hands of commission member Samuel Knox Skinner. He had said moments before the vote that Oceana was too big a problem for BRAC to tackle. But he relented after the commission staff convinced him that they could add something to the debate about the jet base's future if it were placed on the list for possible closure.

Without his vote, the commission wouldn't have reached the seven-out-of-nine majority required to add a base to the list – a threshold that many observers saw as almost impossible to reach.

Skinner changed his mind, it seemed, in the spirit of “Why not ? Why not keep talking and analyzing? What is there to lose?”

On another level, however, there had been signs of trouble along the way.

While many people assumed Oceana was safe after it stayed off Rumsfeld's list in May, the Defense Department's own report on recommended base closures noted that the Navy had examined the idea of shutting down the base.

According to documents released in May, the Navy's senior leadership even went so far as to ask that the Marine Corps air station in Beaufort, S.C., be kept off the BRAC list specifically because they were concerned about Oceana's viability as a tactical base and needed an alternative site.

In the months leading up to the May recommendations, documents show, Navy leadership also examined a scenario to close Oceana – but without another realistic location for its 244 fighter jets, concluded closure wasn't possible.

True to its word not to simply endorse the Pentagon's wishes, it didn't take long for the appointed commission to broach the topic of Oceana.

In its first week of hearings in mid-May, one commissioner – retired Army Gen. James T. Hill – said he was surprised Oceana wasn't slated for closure because of the residential and commercial development that's surrounded it, limiting operations and posing noise and safety concerns.

The following week, May 24 and 25, BRAC Commission Chairman Anthony Principi and Commissioner Lloyd Newton, a retired Air Force general, visited a number of Hampton

Roads bases affected by the proposals. The pair didn't tour Oceana – a sign to some that the base wasn't a priority because any facility slated for closure requires a visit from at least two commission members.

But Principi and Newton didn't stay away from the topic of Oceana entirely.

According to commission documents, Capt. Tom Keeley, the commander of Oceana, met with the pair in Norfolk during their two-day trip. The 21-page brief he presented was titled "Encroachment Issues."

Principi and Newton apparently got the message. At a news conference May 25, Principi commented on "very, very significant encroachment at Oceana" but said it was premature to consider the base for closure.

Five weeks later, the commission made its doubts about Oceana even clearer.

On July 1, Principi asked in writing why the Pentagon hadn't considered closing Oceana and relocating its aircraft to Moody Air Force Base in Valdosta, Ga.

As required by the BRAC process, the commission must notify the Pentagon in writing that it's considering adding a base to the list. Gordon England, the acting deputy defense secretary, replied July 14 that a better alternative to moving Oceana would be building a new master jet base from the ground up.

The same day that England penned his response, a delegation of local and state officials and two retired admirals went to Washington to make their case for keeping Oceana off the list. Bob Matthias, assistant to Virginia Beach City Manager James Spore, said he took about 20 minutes to explain the city's efforts to work with the Navy to control development around the base.

Two BRAC staff members – one was Bill Fetzner, the commission's Navy-Marine Corps team senior analyst – listened, then asked a lot

of questions. They were already well-versed in city issues, Matthias said.

Though the group Citizens Concerned About Jet Noise has complained about the decibel levels of jets passing overhead, Matthias said the commission members didn't seem to care.

"Surprisingly, they said repeatedly that in their opinion, noise was not an issue," Matthias said. However, he added, they made it clear they were concerned about development in the potential crash zones around Oceana.

They asked about Virginia's strict property laws, particularly a provision called "by right," in which property owners have a right to develop their land without interference as long as it complies with zoning.

The discussion got specific, Matthias said, down to Virginia Beach City Council's decision two years ago to approve a rezoning request allowing condominiums on a site where a motel had been.

Matthias explained that the council saw rezoning the property on Laskin Road as an improvement because fewer people would reside inside the potential accident zone. The Navy thought otherwise and asked that the rezoning be denied.

"The Navy has its mission, which every one on council wants to support," Matthias said he told the staffers. "And the council has its hands pretty much tied by Virginia law."

Fetzner requested more information about that project, which the city forwarded the next day. On Tuesday, before the vote on Oceana, Fetzner used the Laskin Road project as an example of the problems at the base.

He showed the commission a map of Virginia Beach and pinpointed the project's location, then kicked what had been a routine municipal issue to the national stage.

"The commanding officer of NAS Oceana opposed that development in writing to the City Council on June the 5th, 2003, stating that residential land use was incompatible ... and

should be prohibited," Fetzer told commissioners. "In November 2003, the City Council approved that project over the Navy's objections."

Oceana's supporters interpreted Fetzer's presentation as a sign they need to do a better job convincing the commission and its staff that both the city and the state are committed to protecting the base.

"We need to present this united front that Oceana needs to come off this list," Gov. Warner remarked later. "In this case, we have the support of the Navy. We have facts that we think were not fully presented to the commissioners."

Despite the shock of Tuesday's vote, many people think Oceana will emerge from this round of BRAC intact – if not unscathed.

"Even though they could close Oceana, it's clear that they have no intention of doing so," said Christopher Hellman, who tracks base closing issues at the Washington-based Center for Arms Control.

That's because, he said, the BRAC Commission also voted Tuesday not to consider major changes at Moody Air Force Base, meaning it wouldn't be designated as an option for Oceana's planes.

Hellman said it's clear commissioners feel the Navy needs to close Oceana, but they recognize that will be a long and complicated process, and they're just trying to help things along by keeping the talks going.

State Sen. Kenneth Stolle certainly hopes that's the case. He said he was surprised that seven commission members voted to add Oceana – but he feels that the group figured vigorous discussion wouldn't hurt.

"Every now and then, you need to get people's attention, and I think that's exactly what this is," he said. "I hope I'm right."

Aide: Base closures 'misused'

Pittsburgh Tribune- Review (Pittsburgh, PA)

July 27, 2005

HARRISBURG -- The Air Force "misused" this year's round of base closures by attempting to disband or move National Guard units without state input, drawing sustained criticism and two lawsuits, a senior adviser to Gov. Ed Rendell said Tuesday.

Adrian R. King Jr., who is spearheading Rendell's response to the base closure proposals, said Pennsylvania's lawsuit against the Pentagon over the proposed deactivation of a Pennsylvania National Guard unit, if successful, could nullify many of the Air Force's proposed changes nationwide.

The federal Base Realignment and Closure Commission is reviewing a Pentagon plan to close 13 military bases statewide. The 911th Airlift Wing in Moon and the Army's Charles E. Kelly Support Facility in Collier would be shuttered, and the Army Reserve's 99th Regional Readiness Command would move from Moon to Fort Dix, N.J. The local bases provide 845 jobs directly and support an estimated 571 private-sector jobs.

A Pennsylvania National Guard unit is based at Willow Grove Naval Air Station near Philadelphia, one of the bases targeted for closure. King said the state is exploring the idea of taking over operation of Willow Grove.

King, a lawyer, spoke with The Associated Press in a 90-minute interview at the offices of the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, which he has headed since January, after two years on Rendell's staff.

The state's lawsuit against the Pentagon protests the proposed deactivation of the 111th Fighter Wing without Rendell's consent.

"The Air Force essentially misused the BRAC process in 2005," King said. "Most observers, educated observers, would say that the Air Force is essentially trying to ... force transformation and they're trying to do it that way because

they're trying to insulate it from congressional oversight. But that's just wrong."

Since Pennsylvania filed its lawsuit July 11, Illinois also has filed suit and Missouri has threatened to do the same, while BRAC commissioners have expressed reservations about parts of the Pentagon's proposals to change dozens of Air National Guard units.

King noted that the Army also proposed changes to Army National Guard units, but it has avoided similar controversy or criticism because it consulted state officials beforehand -- unlike the Air Force.

Willow Grove, 10 miles north of Philadelphia, is home to the 111th Fighter Wing, plus Air Force and Navy reserve units.

If Pennsylvania's lawsuit is successful, it could undo much of the Air Force's BRAC strategy across the country, he said.

"I think that it can have a very dramatic effect because, as I understand it, about 80 percent of the Air Force BRAC recommendations have to do with the Air National Guard," King said. "So in one way, you could end up with all those recommendations essentially being declared illegal and null and void."

The BRAC Commission is reviewing the Pentagon plan. The panel's final report is due by Sept. 8 to Congress and President Bush for approval. The commission also is awaiting an opinion from the Justice Department regarding the Pennsylvania lawsuit.

Defense Department spokesman Glenn Flood said the Pentagon stands by its recommendations.

Pennsylvania is proposing to the base-closure commission that the Pentagon transfer Willow Grove into state hands, much like what happened with Fort Indiantown Gap in 1998. The Lebanon County base lost about 600 jobs at the time, but it remains an active training site for National Guard units in the region while being

run by the state for significantly less than what it cost the federal government to operate.

A similar arrangement would allow the state to keep the 111th Fighter Wing active, even if other units leave the base.

"The state could run that facility," King said. "We've done it at Fort Indiantown Gap. ... There's no doubt that we could run Willow Grove, as well."

Opinions/ Editorials

Additional Notes