

Reports of base closing may be premature [news]

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Subject: Reports of base closing may be premature [news]

REPORTS OF BASE CLOSING MAY BE PREMATURE

BY ROBERT MACY
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LAS VEGAS (AP) -- Reports of the demise of a top secret base in the Nevada desert may be premature, according to a Washington source and folks at the Little A'Le'Inn.

Popular Mechanics magazine, in a cover story in its June issue, said the top-secret facility known as Area 51 has been abandoned and operations moved to a site in eastern Utah.

``That's ridiculous,'' said a congressional source in Washington, D.C.

The source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said it would cost \$5 billion to move the operations and such an expenditure is unthinkable when Congress and the Pentagon are weighing another round of base closings nationwide.

The public affairs office at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas referred inquiries on Area 51 to the Air Force media relations office in the Pentagon. Repeated phone calls to the office went unanswered Wednesday.

Residents in the tiny hamlet of Rachel, Nev., some 20< miles from the secret base, say it apparently is still operating. Area 51, a remote base 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas, has been the site of development of America's top-secret aircraft, dating back to the U-2 spy plane more than 40 years ago. The SR-71 Blackbird and F-117A stealth fighter were also tested at the desolate location adjoining the nation's nuclear testing grounds. A new generation aircraft, known as Aurora, is believed to be undergoing tests there.

The site was so secret that Air Force officials refused to acknowledge its existence until recent years when a federal lawsuit by former workers forced their hand. Now they acknowledge simply that training and testing activities take place at Groom Lake, a dry lake bed at Area 51.

Popular Mechanics science/technology editor Jim Wilson said Area 51 operations were being moved to a location in eastern Utah known as Area 6413.

He said the Utah site would be used for testing of a military version of NASA's X-33, the next generation of space shuttle being developed by Lockheed Martin Skunk Works in Palmdale, Calif.

The X-33, known as Venture Star, will have vertical takeoff and horizontal landing capabilities and will be able to deliver payloads of up to 40,000 pounds to low earth orbit.

The magazine said the Air Force has an assets-sharing agreement with NASA on future use of the X-33, and that Skunk Works designers are researching ways to adapt it for military use.

The magazine said Area 51 had been closed because of radioactive residues from nearby nuclear weapons testing and growing public exposure of the base. For years, under an open skies treaty, Russia has been able to photograph the base with spy satellites while curious Americans were kept seven miles away by armed guards.

The reported closing was met with skepticism by Pat Travis, 53, who operates the Little A'Le'Inn, a cafe in Rachel.

``I think the thing about the base closing is supposition,'' Travis said in a telephone interview. ``We get people in here every day who work out there. I think the report is a way to get people to not come out here.''

Travis' cafe, filled with UFO lore, is a gathering point for people in the town of 100, as well as workers at Area 51 and the nearby Tonopah Test Range, where the F-117A operated under a shroud of secrecy for years.

UFO aficionados claim that research involving space aliens has been conducted at Area 51.

Travis' daughter, Connie West, 29, reported seeing activity at Area 51 when she and her husband escorted a television crew to a site several miles from the base two weeks ago.

She said guards flashed spotlights on them as they approached the restricted area. She said the base lit up briefly, then went dark again.

``It was like as if someone were turning lights on in a room, then back off again,'' West said. ``They're still out there, they're still playing their games. It's mind-boggling what they do out there.''

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