

Las Vegas Review-Journal on "New Area 51" [news]

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CLASSIFIED AIR FORCE BASE GROOMING FOR A MOVE?

A magazine says Area 51's activities are moving to Utah, but others say the facility is preparing for some downtime.

By Keith Rogers
Review-Journal

Claims by a national magazine this week that activities at the Air Force's classified base, known as Area 51, are being moved to eastern Utah have stirred a controversy among observers.

Some say the base, at Groom Lake 90 miles north of Las Vegas, continues to conduct its secret business as usual -- developing futuristic aircraft and testing U.S. warplanes against Russian radar systems and fighter jets.

Others say the base has been put in a "caretaker status," similar to what happened for periods after the U-2 spy plane first flew in 1955 and again after another surveillance craft, the SR-71, became operational in 1966. Both planes were tested at the base, according to aviation industry sources.

Another caretaker period when the base was mothballed occurred in the mid- to late 1970s, before activities picked up to test and develop Stealth aircraft, the F-117A and the B-2, said a former base worker who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

He said the Groom Lake base is not headed for shutdown, though.

"They've got too much there as far as runways and hangar facilities to completely walk away from that place," he said.

"There's some merit that they're putting it into caretaker status," he said. "They're not even flying a kite up there."

The Air Force, said Capt. Stacey Hawkins, a spokesman in Washington, won't confirm or deny anything about the base or whether its function has been transferred to the Utah Launch Complex, near the Green River in the eastern part of the state, as reported in the June issue of Popular Mechanics.

The article's author, Jim Wilson, gives a first-person account of his recent experiences with rusty, locked gates on the boundary of the restricted Groom Lake area of the Nellis Air Force Range. He writes about the military and NASA teaming up to test a reusable Lockheed Martin spacecraft, the X-33, at the obscure Utah complex, designated as Area 6413. The Utah site is a launching area for tests involving the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico.

This new class of space planes, Wilson said, "can't be tested at a site like Area 51. They are designed to be tested at a place where they can be launched," he said.

Wilson admitted, however, that some type of aircraft testing is probably taking place at Groom Lake. "But as far as the testing of the next mysterious generation of aircraft, it's not happening there," he said in a telephone interview from New York.

But Glenn Campbell, director of the Area 51 Research Center and master of an Internet site that tracks base activities, tells a different story. He says the 1,565-space parking lot at McCarran International Airport for workers catching the Janet jets that shuttle them to Groom Lake has been 85 percent full this week.

That means, he said, there are at least 800 to 1,000 workers going to the base daily, counting some 100 who come from rural areas. The figure does not include those workers who are heading to the Tonopah Test Range instead of Groom Lake.

The Popular Mechanics article is "crapola -- you can quote me on that," said Campbell, whose apartment overlooks the Janet terminal parking lot.

"The article gives me no evidence at all that anything has changed at Area 51," he said.

A flurry of e-mail has been posted on Campbell's website.

One message, from Ken MacGray, said Wilson's story has "suddenly become an unexpected bounty to the Air Force, particularly to those folks at Nellis Air Force Base who are, no doubt, rolling on the floor laughing over the article."

Another e-mailer, Dan Zinngarbe, wrote Campbell: "I sincerely doubt that the areas they mention are involved in black aircraft testing. The mention of sightings of lights in the sky in the Four Corners area is particularly funny," given that it's already an air-traffic route.

John Pike, Space Policy Project director for the Federation of American Scientists, a Washington-based watchdog group, said he defers to Campbell on the status of the Groom Lake base.

But Pike said he thinks Popular Mechanics is "definitely on to something."

He said the article mentions several classified programs from the late 1980s -- Science Dawn, Science Realm and Have Region -- which are also mentioned in some military contracting documents.

The X-33, he said, stands to be a radical, high-risk design, more like a Stealth bomber than the space shuttle.

"It looked to me that where they jumped the gun is assuming Groom Lake had been shut down and the X-33 thing was more covert and clandestine than in fact it is," Pike said.

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