

BRAC's Proposed Northwest Closures Would Gut Defense, Science, and Jobs

by Marcia Merry Baker

At the BRAC hearing in San Antonio, July 10, the protests against base-closing plans focussed primarily on the Texas installations at Red River Army Depot and the Lone Star Army Ammunition Plant, both in Texarkana, and the Ingle-side Naval Station, near Corpus Christi.

First opened in August 1941, the Red River Arsenal was intended only as an ammunition warehouse, but over the years it has become a national center for highly skilled materiel fabrication and assembly, as well as storage and handling, with extensive regional civilian involvement. Today, Red River is the Center of Industrial and Technical Excellence for tactical wheeled vehicles, small emplacement excavators, and Bradley tanks.

The Red River Army Depot now is the nation's only road-wheel and track-shoe rebuilding and manufacturing center, where vehicles are restored for use. Red River is the only facility to recertify Patriot and Hawk missile systems, and the installation also produces a wide range of other items, from timber products to rubber goods.

The Red River depot is host to ten tenant organizations, the largest being the Defense Logistics Agency's Distribution Depot, storing items valued at more than \$6 billion. It is by far the largest employer in the Texarkana region, and the skill levels and versatility among the workers is outstanding. The range of specialists include electronics technicians, engineers, chemists, machinists, mechanics, welders, and others. They partner with private companies (such as the original manufacturers), and share skills or train their personnel. Among many other specialties unique for the Defense Department, Red River workers refit rubber to tracks and wheels. The Iraqi conditions were ruining rubber on vehicles, but Red River chemists invented a compound which mitigated the problems.

Ricky Webster, a Red River engineer, warned the Commission at the hearing that the workforce now numbers in the range of 4,500, most of whom would not move to other depots if Red River was shut down. The consequence would be a national loss. "If you have dedicated people that know their business," he said, "you just can't replicate that overnight."

Since Fiscal Year 2003, the workload at Red River has increased by 600%, including making add-on armor kits for vehicles in Iraq, and work deadlines have been consistently met. A contingent of 2,200 people made the trip from the Texarkana area to San Antonio to attend the July hearing.

Northwest: Vital Infrastructure, 'Big Skies'

At the Portland, Ore. BRAC hearing June 17, presentations were given by delegations from Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Montana. A profile of the leading economic features of the entire region was presented by Robert Jordan, special agent in charge of the FBI in Oregon, who reviewed the most valued regional infrastructure, as part of his argument in support of maintaining in-depth, regionally based defense against terrorism.

Many speakers stressed the obligation to maintain ready airlift and other defenses in the region, for fire-fighting and other emergency uses, as well as defense. But they also stressed the excellent "Big Sky" opportunities for basing, refueling, and training of air crews, because of the vast volume of space in which to operate, without the constraints of congestion and encroachment found in more populous regions. Jordan began by describing the nuclear power installations of the Northwest and their need for security. Other high-tech facilities include the chemical weapons depot at Umatilla, Ore. This is one of eight depots nationally that can store such weapons, and one of very few that can destroy them.

Along the many rivers of the Pacific Northwest, there are more than four dozen dams considered "high hazard" by the FBI. There are 31 Federally owned dams on the Columbia River system alone, in the multi-state region. Less than 40 miles from downtown Portland, is the Bonneville Dam, with more than 0.5 million acre-feet of water. The associated electricity transmission lines are critical throughout the West.

The transportation systems are life-lines, including the Western ports. Portland alone has 64 ships a month. Related to all this are the chemical, gas, and oil storage facilities.

Finally, there are special national economic assets, such as "Silicon Forest"—the high-tech electronics Oregon/Washington region employing over 64,000 people, in 1,700 firms, many of which are engaged in defense-related work, as well as bio-tech and other areas.

Against this entire economic background, several lawmakers and military spokesmen made the point that no Air Guard and other capacity dare be removed from the Northwest. Idaho Governor Kempthorne said, for example, "Given our core location with the National Interagency Fire Center, and considering our ability to quickly respond to regional disaster, it becomes easy to see why tactical air lift is critical for this location."