



News Release

UNITED STATES AIR FORCE

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OVERGROWN TREES AT CHARLESTON AFB TO BE CUT FOR FLIGHT SAFETY

CHARLESTON AIR FORCE BASE, S.C. – Commercial and military aircraft flights in and out of Charleston will get a big boost in safety when many trees are removed from the ends of the base's two runways.

An airfield survey in 2001 revealed that trees near the end of the two runways had grown through the approach zone. The entire forest canopy around the base has grown to a height that exceeds safety criteria for airfields.

The tree removal project is expected to protect lives and Air Force property; maximize the safety and efficiency of runway operations; meet constant availability standards of an unrestricted approach during landing procedures; and maintain precision landing capabilities for all aircraft operations, according to a July 2002 Environmental Assessment, prepared by the 437th Civil Engineer Squadron Environmental Flight.

Most of the trees are fast-growing pine trees, according to Kevin Porteck, an Air Force forester from the Air Force Center for Environmental Excellence at Brooks AFB, Texas, who conducted the comprehensive survey of the forested land around the base.

The base will use a commercial contractor to remove the intruding trees near the ends of the runways. The tree removal project is expected to begin by Oct. 15 and will take approximately 10-12 weeks to complete.

Base residents will likely notice the trees being cut down along Arthur Drive as they enter and leave the base through the Rivers gate entrance, off Aviation Avenue, said Bill Werrell, 437th CES community planner.

"The other areas where the trees are being cut down will not really be that noticeable to the public," said Werrell.

The timber harvest/sale portion of this project is being funded by the Air Force Forestry Management account, said Al Urrutia, 437th CES environmental engineer. The actual tree-cutting project will be managed by the AFCEE.

"A commercial logger will remove the trees, especially the marketable ones, for timber," said Urrutia.

Safety for the commercial side of the flightline will also be enhanced by removal of the trees.

"This project will enhance flight safety for civilian, as well as military operations," said Sam Hoerter, director of airports for the Charleston County Aviation Authority. "We support our Air Force partners, and appreciate their continuing contributions to this unique joint-use operation."

Werrell said to keep the trees from growing back, selected (environmentally safe) herbicides will be used.

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"The herbicides will allow the low-growing vegetation to return, but will crowd out the future growth of trees," said Werrell.

Werrell added that the base has selectively trimmed trees in the past, but the recurring maintenance costs and ability to do selective cuts were becoming too difficult to accomplish.

"The tree canopy around Charleston AFB affects the base's 50:1 glide slope," explained Werrell about the safety standard for most airfields.

"Which means for every 50 feet you go out, you are allowed to go up one foot from the end of each runway.," continued Werrell. "If you follow that angle, you'll see that we have a large number of trees which penetrate through that glide slope."

Additional trees off-base will be cut later, once negotiations are complete with the affected landowners, said Werrell. He added that the Savannah District Army Corps of Engineers would handle those negotiations.

The growth of the trees also affected the base's attempts to bring on line a new Precision Approach Path Indicator system, which provides an optimal flight path for aircraft attempting to land on the base's primary instrumented runway when the weather is bad. Because the trees are so high, the new system could not be certified.

"Taking this action to remove the trees obstructing the flight path is critical to safe flight operations at Charleston AFB and the Charleston International Airport," said Lt. Col. Jim Barr, 437th Operations Support Squadron command and a C-17 pilot with over 4,500 flying hours.

"We must remove the trees to comply with Federal Aviation Administration regulations and to maintain our certification as an instrument airfield.

"One of our runways has already been closed to instrument flight, restricting aircraft to land and takeoff only during visual flight conditions," Barr explained. "This restriction limits accessibility of the airport during inclement weather conditions. The trees are too close to the flight path of approaching and departing aircraft, and will continue to grow deeper into the protected airspace. That growth will increase the risk to flight safety until they are removed."

Charleston AFB has two class-B runways which are used primarily for high performance and lift aircraft like the C-5 Galaxy, C-17 Globemaster III and C-130 Hercules.

"Since Charleston AFB uses Visual Air Navigation Facilities located on the approach ends of the runway, trees or other obstructions must be removed for flight safety," concluded Werrell.

The base completed an environmental assessment and found that the removal of the trees will have no significant impact on the environment provided several safeguards were followed in affected wetlands.

"Because the proposed action affects trees in wetlands, environmental impacts had to be evaluated by completing an environmental assessment," said Urrutia.

The EA can be viewed on the base's public web site at <https://www.charleston.af.mil> or at the Dorchester library branch.

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