

Lockheed VP: F-35s to arrive by fall

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OKALOOSA ISLAND — The first two F-35 Joint Strike Fighters to come to Eglin Air Force Base are being built in Lockheed Martin's production facility in Texas and are expected to be completed in the next three weeks.

Okaloosa County's Economic Development Council held a roundtable discussion Wednesday at the Ramada Plaza Beach Resort that focused on the economic impact of the 2005 BRAC decision. More than 200 business and community leaders from Okaloosa and Santa Rosa counties were given a status update on the incoming F-35 Joint Strike Fighter and the 7th Special Forces.

"We are flying these planes a lot. Two hundred flight hours have already been logged," said J.R. McDonald, Lockheed Martin's vice president of corporate and business development, of the F-35. "It's real. It's really coming to Eglin and it really will be here in the fall."

F-35s are being tested at Edwards Air Force Base and other locations. Lockheed Martin has three versions of the F-35 under construction, designed to meet the specific needs of the Air Force, Marines and Navy.

Though 12 other military bases around the country will have their version of the F-35 for training missions, Eglin Air Force Base will be the only base training pilots from all three military branches as well as the coalition partners that are collaborating with United States on the project.

Eglin is expected to reach capacity on the F-35 sometime in 2013 or 2014, said Col. Arthur Tomasseti, vice commander of the 33rd Fighter Wing at Eglin and one of the guest speakers.

"A lot of work has been done to start up these operations," Tomasseti said. "There's nothing like it and there probably won't be anything like it (here again)."

Construction is also well into development on the new \$380 million base for the 7th Special Forces. Lt. Col. Gary Bloomberg, chief the Special Forces integration team at Eglin, said the new base should be occupied in 11 months, but that 23 families and 11 single soldiers in the 7th Special Forces will move to the area next month.

Rick Harper, director of the Haas Center for Business Research and Economic Development at the University of West Florida, also presented an update on the economic impact the BRAC decision is expected to have on the region.

In Okaloosa County, the population is project to grow about 3 percent in the next year and up to 7 percent by 2025. The gross regional product is projected to grow by about 7 percent in the next year because of the F-35 and 7th Special Forces and by nearly 10 percent after 2016.