

Fort Worth Star-Telegram (TX)

2001-11-01

Section: NEWS

Edition: FINAL

Page: 3

Flight ban idles airports near nuclear plant

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As a former World War II bomber pilot, Gene Keyt understands the need to steer clear of a target as significant as the Comanche Peak nuclear power plant.

But today, as a pilot of a four-seat Bonanza with a 300-horsepower engine and an 80-gallon fuel tank, Keyt finds it a little silly that the federal government has temporarily closed down the private Hood County airport, where he keeps the plane that he shares with his son.

"We appreciate that sacrifices have to be made at a time like this and we certainly want to be responsible," said Keyt, 77, a retired aerospace engineer who logs about 250 hours in the air annually. "But the planes that fly in and out of here could not come close to being an effective threat to that facility."

Keyt is among aviation enthusiasts who've been effectively grounded by the Federal Aviation Administration order this week that prevents private aircraft from coming within 11 miles of 86 nuclear plants and other facilities across the nation.

"A small, general aviation aircraft is not a significant risk to a nuclear facility," said Warren Morningstar, a spokesman for the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association. "On the other hand, we also have to accept that there are serious national security threats, and we will do our best to protect the nation and keep people safe."

Commercial airplanes, which fly at higher altitudes, will not be affected by the order.

The order is scheduled to be lifted Wednesday.

For Keyt and members of the Experimental Aircraft Association chapter based at Pecan Plantation Airport near Granbury, the grounding order means that their treasured hobby is put on hold. For the workers and business owners at Granbury Municipal Airport, which is about 10 miles from the Comanche Peak reactor, the order means lost income and uncertainty.

John Holt, who manages the city-owned airport where 40 to 50 planes and small jets take off and land on an average day, said the facility has been eerily still for much of the past two days.

"As far as flying in Granbury goes, it killed it," Holt said. "No one is about to go up and risk getting shot down by an F-16."

The flight schools, sky-diving clubs and other airport-based businesses are empty, Holt said. The runway is idle and the hangars are quiet. No one is buying the fuel that the city sells to keep the small airport from having to rely too heavily on subsidies from Granbury taxpayers, he said. Holt says the skies are being cleared so that military leaders can more easily identify and intercept any craft that enters the airspace with malicious intent.

"They're not afraid of old John Doe who might decide to cruise around in his own private airplane," Holt said. "They're making it so that the only ones who dare fly around here have absolutely no business being here."

This report includes material from The Associated Press.