

Air Force aims to burn less fuel as part of climate fight

By Daniel Cusick

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The Air Force is in a dogfight with climate change. The outcome will determine whether the United States continues to dominate sky and space during a period of geopolitical turbulence.

In a 20-page [climate plan](#) released Wednesday, the Air Force paints a stark picture of its risks from global warming — both on the ground and in the air — while also acknowledging the massive greenhouse gas emissions associated with using jet fuel.

“Our mission remains unchanged,” Air Force Secretary Frank Kendall said in an accompanying statement. But “we recognize that the world is facing ongoing and accelerating climate change and we must be prepared to respond, fight, and win in this constantly changing world.”

The Air Force is the third branch service to release a climate action plan this year, following the [Army’s plan](#) in February and the [Navy’s plan](#) in May ([Climatewire](#), May 25). The Air Force operates 175 installations around the world consisting of 83 active-duty bases, 83 Air National Guard installations and nine Air Force Reserve bases.

Senior leadership said the branch service, which includes the Space Force, will address climate change through technological advancement, increased protection and resilience for air bases, and curbing its reliance on fossil fuels to keep its roughly 5,500 active aircraft flying.

The plans align with two 2021 executive orders that described climate considerations as “an essential element of United States foreign policy and national security.” It ordered agency heads to “develop, implement and update climate adaptation and resilience plans.”

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin a year ago called climate change “an existential threat” to national security. He said the Defense Department “must act swiftly and boldly to take on this challenge and prepare for damage that cannot be avoided.”

Of the three branch service plans, experts said the Air Force provided the most unflinching assessment of how climate change threatens its day-to-day operational readiness.

For example, the plan makes clear: “We cannot launch or recover aircraft on a flooded runway, nor can we operate from installations devastated by hurricanes and wildfires.” In addition, it noted that in the Arctic, “thawing permafrost affects infrastructure across the region, buckling roads and destabilizing building foundations.”

To help mitigate its contributions to global warming, the Air Force said it plans to address its reliance on fossil fuels. “Our overall goal is to deliver more combat power to the warfighter using less fuel,” the plan states.

Air Force officials said the department is also “using wargames to assess the resiliency of bases and identify vulnerable supply chains and researching cutting-edge technologies that enable operations off the grid if power fails.”

John Conger, director emeritus of the Center for Climate & Security, said he has read all three plans and was impressed with the Air Force proposal. The Air Force document stands out for having “a much greater emphasis on the things they’re going to get done in the next five years, and how that builds into the larger story” of the Defense Department’s climate response, he said.

“It is all too easy to come up with a very ambitious goal, but unless you’re specific about how you’re going to get there, it stays only an ambitious goal,” he said.

The Air Force has felt the urgency of climate action in recent years as several of its bases have been badly damaged or threatened by extreme events. That includes the near destruction of Tyndall Air Force Base in Florida from Hurricane Michael in 2018 and extensive flooding from Missouri River high water in 2019 at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska.

As Hurricane Ian approached Florida's Gulf Coast last week as a Category 4 storm, officials evacuated and suspended all nonessential actions at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, home of the 6th Air Refueling Wing and headquarters of the U.S. Central Command and U.S. Special Operations Command.

Officials said such measures put military readiness at risk, both at home and abroad.