

POLITICS

Camp Grayling expansion opponents question private testing at facility



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As public comment closes on a controversial plan to double the size of the Camp Grayling Joint Maneuver Training Center in Michigan, opponents are raising renewed concerns over the expansion and arrangements with private industries that have been using the camp for testing products.

One former National Guard deputy director has written to Attorney General Dana Nessel and the state of Michigan to raise concerns about a contract to manage private use of the land between the camp's commander and a business started a few months after he took command. He has raised questions about whether the contracts are following state rules and would have proper oversight. Two other similar contracts, which help Camp Grayling to manage the private use of the facilities, went to organizations linked to the former assistant adjutant general for the Michigan Army National Guard.

Nessel's office said it won't investigate the allegations because the letter wasn't addressed directly to her office. The state Department of Technology, Management and Budget said it would look into the complaint but would convey the results of its review directly to the complainant.

In the meantime, complaints persist about private industry testing on the property, which is the largest National Guard training facility in the country.

“I’m very pro-military. I’m very pro-law enforcement. That’s not the issue at all,” said Rep. Ken Borton, a Gaylord Republican whose property would abut the proposed expansion. Borton and three other northern Michigan lawmakers wrote a letter Feb. 8 to Gov. Gretchen Whitmer about their concerns about the expansion.

“If this training would save one more soldier in the field, I would be on board,” Borton said. “The problem is they want to sublease this to private industry, and we have no idea what they’re going to be doing in there.”



The complaints over private contracting at Camp Grayling come as a public comment period closed earlier this month for expanding the base; as the Air National Guard explores an expansion of Alpena-area airspace that includes Camp Grayling; and as Whitmer and Michigan’s federal officials lobby for an expanded fighter mission at the Selfridge Air National Guard Base in Macomb County.

While the Selfridge mission doesn't appear to rely on the Camp Grayling expansion, Michigan’s chances of nabbing a new fighter jet mission may be

bolstered by signs of an environment friendly toward the military. Whitmer's administration recently pledged \$100 million in state money toward upgrading Selfridge to secure the new fighter jets.

The Michigan National Guard maintains its allowance for private research and development on Camp Grayling has not increased in recent years and has been contained to about 12 companies annually. The group has argued the land's use by private industry is in line with national defense strategy and is not connected to the request to nearly double Camp Grayling's footprint by leasing additional land from the state Department of Natural Resources.

“... (W)e do not anticipate a significant increase in the number of service members training at Camp Grayling,” said Capt. Andrew Layton, public affairs officer for the Michigan National Guard. “ ... This request is intended to increase capability, not throughput.”

But recent comments by Michigan National Guard Adjutant General Paul Rogers indicate a growing use by private industry of National Guard property in Michigan. And a contract Camp Grayling entered with a group to manage private industry users noted the “growing capabilities” at the location “are driving an increase of customer utilization.”

Over two months, The Detroit News sought an interview with Rogers but was repeatedly told he was unavailable.

Rogers told DBusiness last year that the National Guard is seeking ways to show businesses how they could leverage the state's military assets “to really amplify their business models, their research and their development, in any different form or fashion.”

“He wanted to promote Michigan's capabilities in a new way, making them more attractive and accessible to businesses with civilian purposes, which was one of the key reasons Rogers was appointed adjutant general of Michigan,” DBusiness said, citing Layton.

A rebrand of National Guard bases

Rogers in 2020 rebranded the state's four national guard locations — the Alpena Combat Readiness Training Center, the Camp Grayling Joint Maneuver Training Center, Selfridge and the Battle Creek Air National Guard Base as the National All-Domain Warfighting Center.

A Michigan National Guard post on the rebranding noted Michigan had a "strong industrial base" that made it an "ideal proving ground for new and innovative technologies" stemming from other government agencies, academia and industry.

During the past several years, that openness to private research and development at Camp Grayling, in particular, has opened doors to a total of 16 private companies that have used the northern Michigan facility, Layton said.

Those projects, according to Layton, include the testing of small weapon holographic sights from EO Tech, a Plymouth-based weapons sights firm; and recoilless/remote howitzer systems from AM General, a South Bend, Indiana firm making specialized military and commercial vehicles, and Mandus Group, an Illinois-based artillery manufacturing company.

Other projects include robotic target systems from Pratt & Miller, a New Hudson motorsports firm with a defense practice, and Marathon Targets, which makes autonomous training targets; information security systems through Lockheed Martin, a defense contractor; and satellite imagery and air and space management systems from ALOFT Technologies, a drone operations company, and MAXAR Technologies, a Colorado-based space technology firm. AT&T even used the land to test out rural, small footprint 5G networks.

Residents say they're concerned that expanding Camp Grayling's training grounds is in part motivated by an increased interest in private research and

development of weapons at the site and have doubts regarding whether the projects are getting proper oversight.

Layton denied private industry use of the land had anything to do with the expansion. The National Guard has maintained the extra land is needed to train soldiers in emerging cyber and space warfare threats, including "cyber and electronic systems that can counter small drone threats and GPS jamming devices."

But Jim Knight, a trustee for Bear Lake Township, said there's been a lack of transparency regarding the types of technology that would be used for that training. The details that have been provided so far, he said, fall short of justifying the expansion, especially if it is at all linked to private testing.

"We believe that that's exactly what they want to do, is that they want to be able to use the public land to allow the defense contractors to develop experimental weaponry," said Knight, whose township includes part of Camp Grayling.

"That is a major, major concern for many people here in light of the fact of the PFAS issue," added Knight, referring to the per- and polyflouroalkyl substances (PFAS) pollution on area waterways that was traced back to Camp Grayling.

Private gatekeepers for public land

In May, the Michigan Army National Guard put out a request for proposals for groups who could provide services to private companies using Camp Grayling. Four companies applied in the two weeks the project was open for bids and four were awarded contracts in July, Layton said. Two of the contracts have been finalized.

Among the companies chosen for the gate keeping role were Velocity Management Systems, IQM Research Institute, Northern Michigan Law Enforcement Training Group and All American General Services.



Velocity Management Systems is owned by Steven Jacobs, who served with Col. Scott Meyers in the Michigan National Guard in the 1980s and 1990s. VMS was incorporated less than three months after Meyers assumed command of Camp Grayling in August 2020, according to state business records.

VMS has been using Camp Grayling for research and development since 2021 under a Memorandum of Agreement with the federal government, Layton said. The group paid \$800.85 to the federal government to use the property twice over the past two years, he said.

Meyers in the July DBusiness article described the rental rates for Camp Grayling as “disgustingly inexpensive.”

The new VMS contract, meant to accommodate Camp Grayling's "growing capabilities," requires the company to vet, oversee and integrate "all private industry" and, when requested, other military or government customers, according to a copy of the contract.

On its own website, VMS describes itself as an "industry liaison" and "single point of contact" for groups that wish to develop "new innovative technologies and capabilities." Practically, the company provides groups using Camp Grayling with information technology support and cybersecurity; range, air space and resource scheduling; and transportation, food service and warehousing, the group's website indicated.

Under the contract, VMS charges Camp Grayling users for its services and keeps all proceeds except for 10% that goes to the state. Users also are required to pay the feds the "disgustingly inexpensive" rental rates Meyers described in July.

Nelson J. Cannon, former assistant adjutant general for the Michigan Army National Guard, is listed as a director for Northern Michigan Law Enforcement Training Group and as the resident agent for All American General Services in state business records. His companies still are ironing out the details of their contacts with the state, but would likely serve a similar purpose to VMS, Layton said.

For Jason Teddy, who filed the complaint last month with Nessel and the Department of Technology, Management and Budget, the contracts raised questions about the relationship between Meyers and Jacobs, the manner in which VMS was contracted and the need for an intermediary with private industry when there are already existing units at Camp Grayling designed to handle private industry use of the land. He said he has yet to hear back from the state department investigating his complaint.

Teddy, who retired from the guard in 2013 as deputy director of logistics for Camp Grayling, said he suspects private use of the property is growing and

that there's an effort to separate military training operations from contractor use of the land, which raised concerns for him regarding oversight.

"I requested that investigation just for the purpose of having someone take a good look at it and analyze the process," Teddy said. "I'm hopeful they're doing everything by the book, but at face value it looks very suspicious."

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