



Saint Louis County

Administration • 100 North Fifth Avenue West, Room 202 • Duluth, MN 55802
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Kevin Z. Gray
County Administrator

October 20, 2026

The Honorable Troy E. Meink
Secretary of the Air Force
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20330-1670

Delivered via email: Kristen.l.auge.mil@army.mil

RE: Support For 148th Fighter Wing in Consideration of F-35 Lightning II Mission

Dear Secretary Meink:

As St. Louis County Administrator, I am writing to express my strongest support for the selection of the 148th Fighter Wing of the Minnesota Air National Guard to ultimately become the preferred alternative to receive the F-35 Lightning II mission.

The 148th Fighter Wing, "Bulldogs", have a storied history here in our county and a record of operational excellence globally. As an exemplary component of our nation's strategic military support network, the unit has consistently demonstrated its ability to maintain the highest levels of warfare readiness, executed unparalleled deployments, and adapted to the evolving demands of modern aerial combat. Our community takes tremendous pride in their dedication, and we believe there is no better-equipped or more deserving unit to operate the military's premier fifth-generation combat aircraft.

St. Louis County has a proven record of supporting U.S. military initiatives and service members both home and abroad. During World War II, our communities of the Iron Range were legendary for their high participation enlistment numbers. Mining towns like Ely, Bovey, and Chisholm saw nearly every eligible household send family members to the front lines, while simultaneously running iron ore mines around the clock to fuel the Allied efforts. Today, the county and our many community partners offer exceptional opportunities in terms of K-12 and higher education, employment opportunities, veteran associations and abundant space for our airmen and their families to live, work and recreate.

Like St. Louis County (the largest county in the USA by area east of the Mississippi), the 148th Air National Guard Base boasts exceptional geographic advantages, as well as expansive and unencumbered airspace ideal for advanced fighter training. Basing the F-35 mission here in 2033 will capitalize on these existing strategic assets, providing the Air Force with maximum operational efficiency and long-term cost-effectiveness.

Thank you for your favorable consideration to move the 148th Fighter Wing forward in this momentous mission assignment.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss this communication, please feel free to contact me at (218) 726-2448, or Deputy County Administrator Jim Gottschald at (218) 725-5066.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'K. Gray', with a stylized, wavy line extending from the end.

Kevin Z. Gray
County Administrator