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Las Vegas' Connection to the Boston Marathon

Nevada National Security Site's Remote Sensing Laboratory Flyovers Help Provide Security

Las Vegas – What do the Boston Marathon, Presidential Inaugurations, New Year's Eve Las Vegas, national political conventions, and even the Super Bowl have in common?



The Remote Sensing Laboratory Aerial Measurement System team surveys the Boston Marathon route.

They're all monitored by the Nevada National Security Site's (NNSS) Remote Sensing Laboratory (RSL) Aerial Measurement System (AMS), with locations at Joint Base Andrews and Nellis Air Force Base, part of the National Nuclear Security Administration's Nuclear Emergency Support Team (NEST).

This year marks the seventh time that RSL's AMS team will support the Boston Marathon, having surveyed the event multiple times since 2014. Measurements are taken with a U.S. Department of Energy-owned Bell 412 helicopter equipped with radiation-sensing technology that flies in

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a low-altitude grid pattern over the marathon route. The measurements are combined to produce a baseline map of naturally occurring radiation, which NEST provides to the Massachusetts Department of Fire Services.

These background surveys are a normal part of security and emergency preparedness activities. “For these events a full team, which includes two pilots, a mechanic, a mission manager, a home team scientist, a data analyst, and an equipment specialist, deploys to ensure a successful mission,” said AMS Supervisor Jacqueline Brandon. “The survey flights generally take two days to complete. With the addition of data processing, planning, and airspace coordination, the whole event takes hundreds of hours.”



The Remote Sensing Laboratory Aerial Measurement System team with their Bell 412 helicopter.



Aerial view of the survey route.

Combined, RSL teams cover hundreds of square miles of terrain every year, collecting background data and supplying it to local safety officials, helping ensure the safety of special events. The highly skilled service provided by the teams has become so well-known and well-respected that the list of nationally heralded, big-name events contacting them to provide survey services grows every year.

The Boston Marathon itself has been held every year since 1897, except for in 2020 when it was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It attracts roughly 30,000 entrants and 500,000 spectators each year, making it New England’s most widely viewed sporting event.

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Members of the Remote Sensing Laboratory Aerial Measurement System team in flight.

“I’m proud of the work we do for Boston Marathon and other events,” Brandon said. “The NNSS’s mission of national security is linked to public safety in more ways than you might think. It’s an amazing opportunity, and I’m glad to be part of it.”

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The NNSS and its related facilities help ensure the security of the United States and its allies by: supporting the stewardship of the nation’s nuclear deterrent; providing nuclear and radiological emergency response capabilities and training; contributing to key nonproliferation and arms control initiatives; executing national-level experiments in support of the National Laboratories; working with national security customers and other federal agencies on important national security activities; and providing long-term environmental stewardship of the NNSS’s Cold War legacy.

The NNSS is managed and operated by Mission Support and Test Services LLC (MSTS). MSTS is a limited liability company consisting of Honeywell International Inc., Jacobs Engineering Group Inc., and HII Nuclear. The NNSS falls under the jurisdiction of the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), an agency within the U.S. Department of Energy. The Site’s operations are government-controlled and contractor-operated, and are overseen by NNSA’s Nevada Field Office, headquartered in North Las Vegas.

For more information on the NNSS, visit www.nnss.gov.

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