

Horsford announces opposition to bombing range expansion

By

Jeniffer Solis - October 24, 2019

Nevada Rep. Steven Horsford announced his opposition Wednesday to the Department of Defense proposal to expand the Air Force's Nevada Test and Training Range into the Desert National Wildlife Refuge north of Las Vegas.

Horsford is the first member of Nevada's congressional delegation to publicly come out against the expansion of the bombing range.

The Air Force wants to add more than 300,000 acres to the Nevada Test and Training Range. Most of it would come from the adjacent land at the Desert National Wildlife Refuge, which provides habitat and protection for the iconic desert bighorn sheep and other species.

Calling the refuge "one of the most pristine and unaltered landscapes in the U.S.," Horsford said it "has been protected as a vital sanctuary for Nevada's natural environment and wildlife for more than 80 years."

"I will do everything in my power to preserve this untouched habitat and biodiverse landscape for the people of Nevada."

The congressman lamented that despite "overwhelming public opposition," the Department of Defense has not revised their proposal, adding that it would prevent public access and threaten wildlife.

Horsford's announcement comes after a coalition of environmentalists, veterans and tribal leaders and other Nevadans went to Capitol Hill offices and pressed lawmakers to block the plan to downsize the wildlife refuge.

"We are thrilled by the congressman's statement. We have been kind of waiting for a champion to emerge on this issue on the federal level," said Patrick Donnelly, the Nevada state director of the Center for Biological Diversity.

Donnelly added the group's efforts to protect the refuge have received positive reaction from Rep. Dina Titus, but Horsford's is the first instance of solid Nevada congressional opposition to the expansion.

"I think we've really turned a corner on this issue in the past couple months," Donnelly said. "There is a wave building, and again we're seeing there is no constituency who supports this expansion, no one in the state of Nevada."

Nevada state lawmakers approved a resolution earlier this year calling on Congress to reject the proposal and work with "all interested parties" to develop a compromise.

The proposed expansion — which must have congressional approval to go forward — would give the military control of nearly 1 million acres of adjacent land at the refuge. The military already has nearly 3 million acres in southern Nevada for testing and training and includes land in Clark, Lincoln and Nye counties.

Congress will have to weigh in on the issue before the current land agreement with the Air Force expires in 2021. The language is expected to be included as part of the massive defense authorization bill next year.

Tom Clark, a lobbyist for the Nevada Outdoor Business Coalition, said it would be "shocking" if the expansion didn't depress the economic opportunities to surrounding businesses.

"Anytime you have this type of activity where the military is taking over 300,000 additional acres of recreational land in the largest wildlife refuge in the lower 48, it just sends a really bad signal," Clark said.

“The business side of the argument was refreshing for the delegation to hear,” said Clark, who attended the meeting with lawmakers on Capitol Hill last week. “They hear a lot from the conversationalist crowd the environmentalist crowd and for us to talk about the importance of access was very well received.”

Earlier this year, Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto [urged Interior Department officials](#) to take a more proactive role in the tussle over the refuge.

A spokesperson in Sen. Cathrine Cortez Masto’s office said Wednesday the senator is working “to ensure the final proposal brought before the Senate respects the voices of our local and Native communities, protects Nevada’s public lands and outdoor recreation economy, and honors our commitment to supporting our armed forces.”

Sen. Jacky Rosen’s office emailed a similar statement.

Noting Rosen’s meeting with the contingent in the capital last week, the statement said Rosen wants to assure Nevadans that their “voices are heard so that we can protect Nevada’s lands while also helping to ensure that our military is able to work to protect our national security.”

The issue has gained additional traction recently as Democratic presidential candidates have been persuaded to come out against the proposal. Sens. Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders announced their opposition last month, citing concerns for native tribes like the Moapa Band of Paiutes, whose homeland once stretched across the area. Sen. Cory Booker and former Housing and Urban Development director Julian Castro have also announced opposition. Most recently, South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg came out against it in Las Vegas this week.

Horsford, meanwhile, said he is “honored that our state is so crucial to our country’s national defense.” But the Defense Department already “has nearly 3 million acres in southern Nevada for testing and training — with a portion of more than 800,000 acres of the refuge already closed to public access. Despite overwhelming public opposition, the Department of Defense has not reconsidered any portion of its proposal, which would close most of the refuge to public access and threaten Nevada’s state animal—the bighorn sheep. Nevadans deserve continued access to this treasured desert habitat.”