

Silver City Daily Press

Air Force opts not to fly F-16s over Gila

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According to a final environmental impact statement released last week, the U.S. Air Force has determined that expanding military airspace over the Gila National Forest and Silver City in order to accommodate an annual 10,000 F-16 training flights out of Holloman Air Force Base is not the best way to fulfill its goal of “optimizing the training airspace at Holloman.”

The final EIS, which is posted on the hollomanafbairspaceeis.com website, instead identifies the existing “Talon” military operations area above a portion of the Lincoln National Forest between Carlsbad and Roswell as the “preferred alternative” to expand operations that support “the training needs for pilots of modern aircraft.”

After a 30-day waiting period, a final Record of Decision — almost certainly greenlighting the Talon expansion — will be issued by the U.S. secretary of the Air Force, a position currently held by acting Secretary John Roth.

Under alternative one, the Talon MOA over Eddy, Chaves and Otero counties, where Holloman currently flies training missions, will be expanded, and no new or expanded MOAs, or new ATCAAs — air traffic control assigned airspace, a kind of temporary, on-call MOA — will be created in southwestern New Mexico.

In releasing the final EIS, the Air Force also redrew its original Talon proposal in order to exclude Carlsbad Caverns National Park from the expanded training area, addressing some of the concerns put forward by residents and business owners in southeastern New Mexico, who also feared the increased flyovers could disrupt livestock operations and interfere with commercial air flights.

According to Alan Shafer, lead airspace analyst for the Air Force, under alternative two, an average of three to four F-16s per day would have flown hourlong training missions in the skies over the southwestern half of the Gila National Forest, including part of the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Area, the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument and Silver City.

Alternative three called for a larger overall expansion of airspace that combined alternatives one and two, so that, according to the final EIS, “the proposed training would be distributed throughout all of the proposed airspace: approximately 6,800 annual sorties would occur in the proposed Talon MOA/ ATCAA; and 3,200 annual sorties would occur in the proposed Cato, Smitty, and Lobos MOAs/ATCAAs” — over the Gila — “and the Christa and Kendra ATCAAs,” over Socorro and Truth or Consequences, and extending south nearly to Las Cruces.

“The proposal would have resulted in 10,000 additional flyovers annually, including low altitude overflights, at 500 feet above the national forest and 2,000 feet above designated wilderness,” according to a press release from New Mexico Wild. “The proposal would have allowed discharging 15,000 magnesium flares and 15,000 toxic ‘defensive chaff’ each year. The proposed expansion over the Gila region was opposed by local governments, businesses, aviators, outdoor enthusiasts, and community members.”

By selecting the Talon MOA as the preferred alternative, the Air Force chose the closest available airspace to Holloman AFB and, since the base and the airspace are both located to the east of White Sands Missile Range, the choice also eliminated the probability that pilots would have to either cancel missions or fly around the testing site, which routinely closes its airspace.

“When I visited Holloman in the summer of 2018, they told me that the expansion of the Talon MOA was their preferred alternative,” said Susan Beck, a retired Air Force colonel who lives in Silver City and has served as a kind of unofficial liaison between her fellow Grant County residents and the Air Force — which failed, initially, to engage communities in Catron County and Grant County in any sort of communication about the plan.

“Holloman always wanted to stay as close as possible, because it would minimize transit time and maximize training time,” she said. “You were not going to be able to do that coming up here. You’d have to go across White Sands, and sometimes you couldn’t do that. It’s a good day for Holloman — I’m sure they’re celebrating down there.”

According to the EIS, “The selection of this alternative was primarily based on feedback from the cooperating agencies, the analysis presented in this EIS, and comments from the public and stakeholders.”

After neglecting to communicate with either the public or local governments in far southwestern New Mexico during the initial scoping period of the environmental study in 2017, the Air Force drew widespread criticism that it was redrawing its map without bothering to find out what lay beneath its proposed military airspace.

A series of Air Force public information meetings and, later, a series of public hearings were held in communities across southern New Mexico, most of which were sparsely attended. The events held in Silver City, however, drew crowds of residents who expressed their unanimous opposition to the proposal to increase training flights over the Gila.

“Hundreds of local citizens turned out, telling the Air Force how special the wild Gila is and why it should be protected,” Todd Schulke, co-founder of the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a press release. “This is one of the rare cases during the Trump era where the process worked, and the Air Force actually listened to the concerns of communities in the Gila area.”

Beck noted that “this is not the only flying activity that was proposed for this area, and there’s already a lot of military training activity happening, including the BR-176 military training route over the wilderness area — that’s why you get these reports of low-level aircraft in Gila Hot Springs.”

When residents or recreationists see those planes, they now often report them to Peaceful Gila Skies, a group that organized opposition to the proposed flyovers. The group describes itself as a coalition of business owners, community leaders, sportsmen and concerned citizens, and conservation groups — including the Center for Biological Diversity, Gila Conservation Coalition, Gila Resources Information Project, Heart of the Gila, New Mexico Wild and the Upper Gila Watershed Alliance.

“Thank you to our elected officials who listened to our community’s concerns over the potential for serious impacts to our environment, our public lands and local economy from the Holloman proposal,” said Allyson Siwik, executive director of the Gila

Conservation Coalition and the Gila Resources Information Project, as well as the main organizer for Peaceful Gila Skies. “We are grateful for the Grant County Commission and town councils from Silver City, Bayard, Hurley and Santa Clara, as well as Senator Martin Heinrich, Senator Tom Udall and Lieutenant Governor Howie Morales for stepping up to oppose this harmful idea.

“Veterans groups have been strong allies of ours in conserving public lands,” Siwik added. “They know that public lands offer solace and healing for many returning combat veterans. How ironic and devastating it would have been to take this away from them. We honor the service of all those in uniform. We also think protecting America’s first wilderness is patriotic and are relieved that the Air Force came to the same conclusion.”

Mark Allison, executive director of New Mexico Wild, said that the outcome illustrated the effectiveness of community organizing and lauded the Air Force for engaging with residents in southwestern New Mexico.

“New Mexicans respectfully sent a loud and clear message that the places we visit to find solitude and enjoy nature are not appropriate for military combat training, [and] today’s announcement by the Air Force reaffirms the notion that constructive public advocacy can lead to positive outcomes,” Allison said in a press release. “We greatly appreciate the important role Holloman Air Force Base plays in our national security, and salute Defense Department officials for honoring their commitment to a fair and open public process, for hearing community concerns, and for ultimately reaching the correct decision.”

District 38 N.M. Rep. Rebecca Dow, who told the Daily Press in 2019 that she supported the Talon alternative and had “concerns about alternatives two and three,” described the provisional decision as “great news for all of us who love the Gila and support our military,” adding that “we need to prepare our military to defend and protect our nation.”

Beck predicted that, when it’s issued around the beginning of March, the Air Force’s Record of Decision won’t deviate from the preferred alternative.

“I believe we can expect the Record of Decision to show alternative one,” she said.

“This gives Holloman what they need.”