

# Air Force seeks to expand training/test range by 300K acres

By Marvin Clemons Thursday, September 1st 2016



Air Force graphic

LAS VEGAS (KSNV News3LV) —

The Air Force has applied to the Bureau of Land Management to continue to use the site of its Nevada Test and Training Range (NTTR) and to expand it by about 300,000 acres of additional public land.

As a result of the withdrawal application, the BLM has segregated approximately 300,000 acres from appropriation under the public land laws. The two-year segregation is obligatory while the Air Force prepares an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on its expansion and extension proposals for the area northeast of Las Vegas.

The Air Force published a Federal Register notice on Aug. 25 stating that it would conduct the EIS on both renewing the existing public land withdrawal, which covers approximately 2.9 million acres, and the withdrawal and reservation for military use of another 301,507 acres of public land to expand the existing range. The existing land withdrawal expires in 2021.

Based on the environmental analysis, the Secretary of the Interior will make a recommendation to Congress on the proposed withdrawals. However, Congress, not the secretary, will make the final decision on both the requested extension and proposed expansion.

As a first step in the EIS process, the Air Force will hold five public meetings on the proposed extension and expansion of the NTTR. The BLM, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the Department of Energy, and the Nevada Department of Wildlife will participate as cooperating agencies in the preparation of the EIS. During the EIS, the Air Force will consider existing uses of the expansion area.

Of the 301,507 additional acres the Air Force is seeking, approximately 266,000 acres are managed for desert bighorn sheep by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as part of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge.

The Nevada Test and Training Range already includes much of this refuge's land. More than 35,000 acres of the expansion area are managed by the BLM. The Air Force expansion would also overlap a designated energy transmission corridor (known as the 368 Energy Corridor) in two locations (Beatty and near Tule Springs National Monument), the current Vegas to Reno Off-Highway race course, and proposed mountain bike and hiking trails in the Beatty area.

The two-year segregation removes the expansion lands from all forms of appropriation under the public land laws, including the mining laws, the mineral leasing laws, and the geothermal leasing laws. Valid existing rights at the time of the segregation will be honored.

The existing Nevada Test and Training Range is already withdrawn from these laws. The action is required under section 204(b)(1) of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. The entire Federal Register Notice for the Notice of Application for Withdrawal Extension and Withdrawal Expansion is available [here](#).

While the Air Force will accept comments on its EIS, the BLM will accept comments on the requested withdrawal actions through the following methods: • E-mail: [BLM\\_NV\\_SNDO\\_NTTR\\_Withdrawal@blm.gov](mailto:BLM_NV_SNDO_NTTR_Withdrawal@blm.gov) • Fax: (702) 515-5023 • Mail: BLM Southern Nevada District Office, Attn: NTTR Withdrawal, 4701 North Torrey Pines Drive, Las Vegas, NV, 89130-2301.

The following is a schedule of the Air Force public meetings on the proposed withdrawals:

- Beatty Community Center, Beatty, 5-9 p.m. Oct. 12.
- Tonopah Convention Center, Tonopah, 5-9 p.m. Oct. 13.
- Caliente Elementary School, Caliente, 5-9 p.m. Oct. 18.
- Pahrangat Valley High School, Alamo, 5-9 p.m. Oct. 19.
- Aliante Hotel, North Las Vegas, 5-9 p.m. Oct. 20.

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## Conservationists sound alarm over Air Force plan to expand test range into refuge



Kent Olson, 68, a historic log cabin restoration expert, checks out the Hidden Forest Cabin in the Sheep Mountains north of Las Vegas Tuesday, May 12, 2009. (K.M. Cannon/Las Vegas Review-Journal)

By HENRY BREAN

LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

The Hidden Forest Cabin would be hidden from public view and Alamo Road all but forgotten under an Air Force proposal to expand its massive test range north of Las Vegas.

Outdoor advocates are sounding the alarm about the Defense Department's plan to add another 301,507 acres to the Nevada Test and Training Range, which already covers more than 2.9 million acres in Clark, Lincoln and Nye counties.

Roughly 227,000 acres of the proposed expansion could restrict public access to several popular spots in the remote heart of Desert National Wildlife Refuge, including most of the unpaved Alamo Road along the western slope of the Sheep Mountains and the hiking trail to [Hidden Forest Cabin](#), a century-old log structure that may have harbored Prohibition-era bootleggers.

"I'm kind of astounded," said John Hiatt, an avid hiker and longtime local conservationist. "This is some of the most pristine land in Southern Nevada in terms of human impact. This would completely change that area forever."

The Air Force is in the early stages of [studying the potential environmental impacts of the range expansion](#).

The proposed action also would renew — perhaps indefinitely — the military's use of the existing test range under a land withdrawal currently set to expire in 2021.

Air Force officials will hold five meetings next month — Oct. 12 in Beatty, Oct. 13 in Tonopah, Oct. 18 in Caliente, Oct. 19 in Alamo and Oct. 20 in North Las Vegas — to field public comments on the various alternatives.

The Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of Energy and the Nevada Department of Wildlife are cooperating agencies in the environmental study. But cooperation should not be confused with approval, said Christy Smith, the Fish and Wildlife Service's project leader for the Desert National Wildlife Refuge Complex.

"We fully support the status quo, and we fully support the U.S. Air Force," Smith said. "We would have concerns about any proposal that would restrict public access" to additional portions of the refuge.

At 1.6 million acres, Desert is the nation's largest wildlife refuge outside of Alaska. President Franklin D. Roosevelt established it in 1936 to protect the desert bighorn sheep and its habitat, but a large portion of the refuge has doubled as a bombing range and military training ground since 1940.

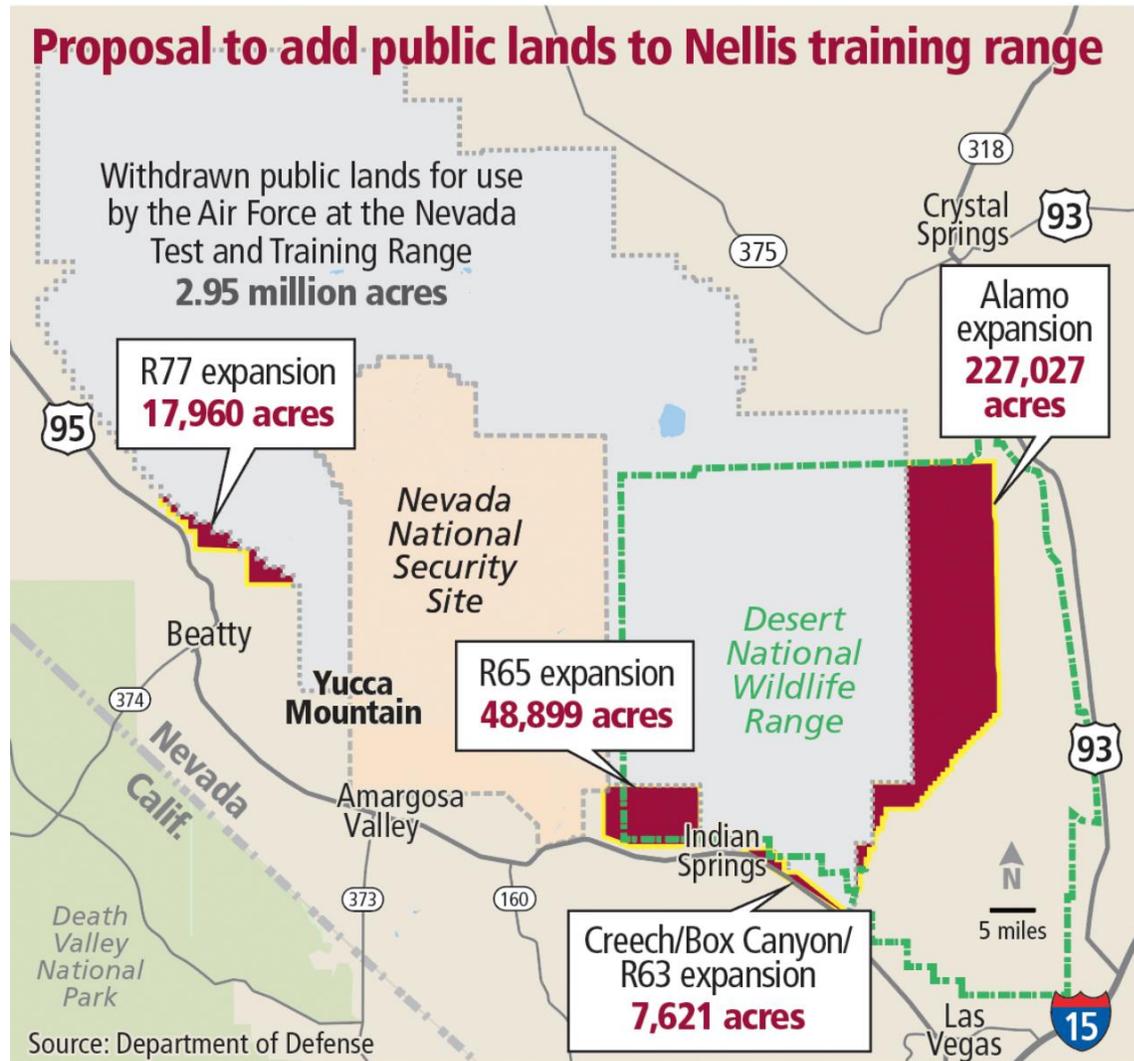
Today the entire western half of the refuge — some 846,000 acres — is under military control and off-limits to the public. The land in question includes a portion of the Nevada Test and Training Range — one of two military training areas used by the U.S. Air Force Warfare Center at Nellis Air Force Base — and all of Creech Air Force Base north of Indian Springs, where operators train and fly drone missions around the globe.

Infamous and ultra-secret Area 51 is just a few miles from the refuge's northern boundary.

Smith said military and wildlife personnel have done an effective job over the years of jointly managing their shared portion of the refuge, though she acknowledged that "because of the secret nature of the Air Force operation, our time out there is very limited."

As for the proposed range expansion, Smith said the idea is still in its infancy, and she doesn't yet know the specifics of the Air Force's plans. "There is nothing that solid yet," she said. "There have been no decisions made yet." Smith expects more details to emerge at the meetings in October. "Anyone who cares should attend

these public meetings and listen,” she said.



GABRIEL UTASI/LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

In a news release about the proposed land withdrawal, Nellis officials said the additional acreage would be used for Red Flag air combat exercises, new test missions for the F-35 joint strike fighter and “increased irregular warfare training activities.”

“The modernization is required to meet a rapidly changing battlespace which has outpaced the existing range capabilities and capacity, in turn limiting realistic and relevant testing, tactics development and training,” base officials said in the release.

But Hiatt wonders how much land is enough for the military, which has already cordoned off millions of acres of desert across Nevada, California and Arizona yet continues to push for more.

“It’s death by accretion,” he said.

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#### Public meeting times and places

- Oct. 12, 5 to 9 p.m., Beatty Community Center, 100 A South Avenue, Beatty.

- Oct.13, 5 to 9 p.m., Tonopah Convention Center, 301 Brougner Avenue, Tonopah.
- Oct. 18, 5 to 9 p.m., Caliente Elementary School, 289 Lincoln Street, Caliente.
- Oct. 19, 5 to 9 p.m., Pahrnagat Valley High School, 151 S. Main Street, Alamo.
- Oct. 20, 5 to 9 p.m., Aliante Hotel, 7300 Aliante Parkway, North Las Vegas.