

Bombing Range or Nature Preserve? A Battle for Control of the Nevada Desert

The Air Force is trying to expand its warfare training zone in Nevada, closing off parts of a wildlife refuge.



Image

The Air Force is seeking to expand training operations in a vast stretch of desert north of Las Vegas. Opposition to the expansion has come from various political factions in the state. Credit Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

**By Thomas Fuller
The New York Times**

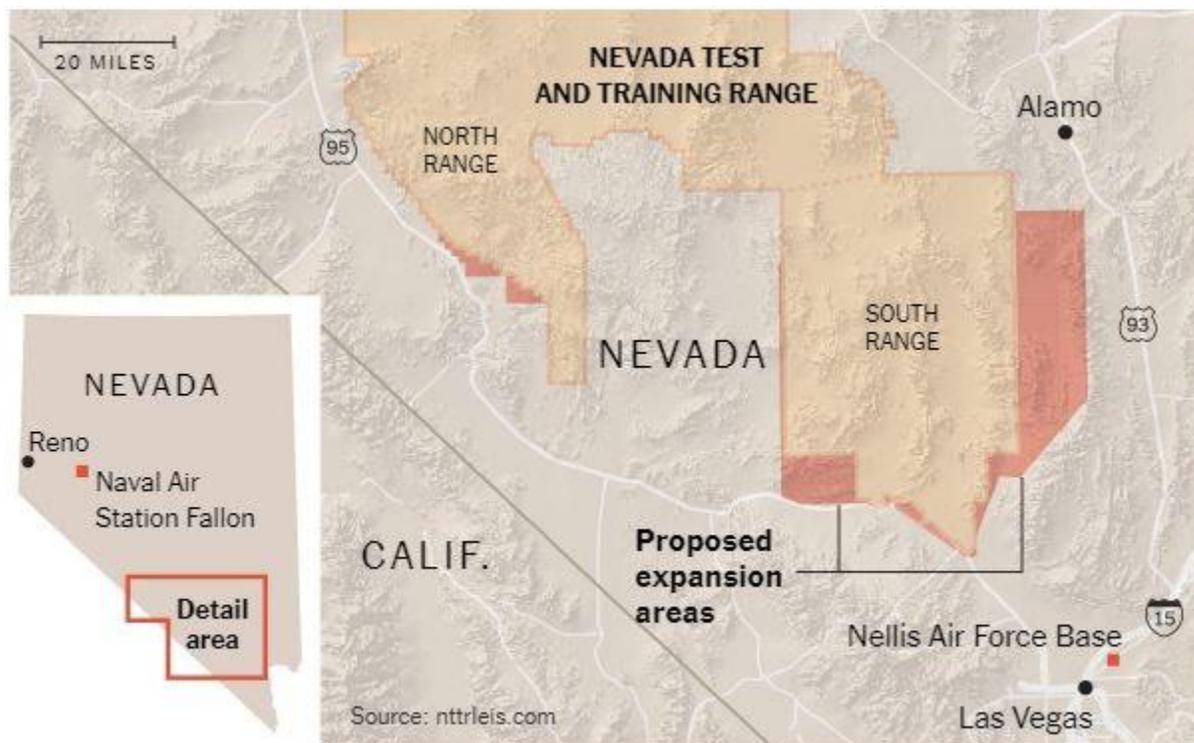
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DESERT NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE, Nev. — Beams of sunlight shone through the clouds like a celestial spotlight on a recent evening in the Mojave Desert, lighting up cliffs, tracts of yucca plants and slabs of volcanic rock covered with ancient stone carvings.

Greg Anderson, a member of the Moapa Band of Paiutes, bathed in the rich light, miles from the nearest paved road, and studied an image of a deer etched on the rock face. The connection with thousands of years of history gave him the chills.

“Goose bumps all up and down my arm,” he said.

This vast stretch of desert north of Las Vegas is part of the largest wildlife refuge in the contiguous United States, six mountain ranges that are home to bighorn sheep, a resplendent palette of wildflowers and sites that Paiute and Shoshone tribes, among others, say are crucial to Native culture.



By The New York Times

As early as next year, the grounds could be reclassified and absorbed into another superlative: the largest military training area in the United States. The 2.9-million-acre Nevada Test and Training Range is already one of the country's most vital aerial gunnery and bombing domains, where the Air Force and its allies practice dogfights and launch missiles onto targets positioned in the desert valleys.

The Air Force is now proposing to expand the range, which was established just before America's entry into World War II, by about 300,000 acres, closing off a part of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge that is currently open to the public.

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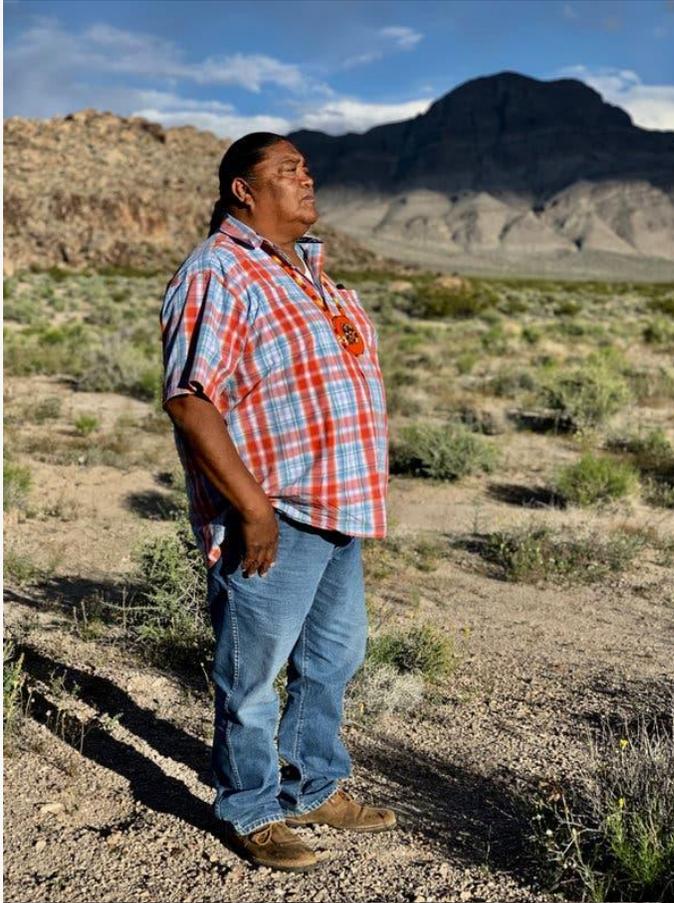
The tension between these competing goals — warfare readiness and wildlife preservation — has stirred impassioned debates in Nevada. In a state increasingly described as politically purple, both Republicans and Democrats have spoken out against the expansion of the Air Force range, and it has become the rare issue that unites voices as diverse as the Sierra Club and the most conservative lawmakers in the state.

Although the final decision on whether to allow the expansion rests with Congress, which will take up the issue next year, lawmakers in Nevada have sought to influence the process, passing a [resolution](#) opposing the expansion by 63-3.

The Air Force, which invites allies like Singapore, Australia and European countries to train in the desert, says it needs the additional 300,000 acres to test the tools of modern warfare. Weapons used during the Vietnam War were dropped a few miles from their targets, said Col. Cavan Craddock, the installation commander for Nellis Air Force Base and the Nevada Test and Training Range. The weapons used today are released from “much, much, much farther,” he said, declining to give precise numbers to protect military intelligence.

“We need the capability to be able to test and train and develop tactics like we are going to execute in war,” Colonel Craddock said.

Greg Anderson, a member of the Moapa band of Paiutes. Credit Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times



Drawings etched into stone at the Desert National Wildlife Refuge north of Las Vegas. Credit Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times



The refuge is home to archeological sites that Native American groups say they consider sacred. Credit Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

Although the Air Force uses simulators extensively, the Nevada range provides crucial real-world training that enhances the safety of pilots, Colonel Craddock said. “There is no better training than live fly, going against the real threat, to prove what you’re doing works.”

The Air Force, which laid out its case for the withdrawal of the public lands in an [environmental impact study](#) last October, says its expansion would have minimal impact on wildlife and that anything of cultural significance, like the stone etchings and ancient pictographs on canyon walls, would not be damaged. It does not plan on using live ammunition in the expanded areas, but it would station equipment there that simulates threats to aircraft.

But even after a year of outreach by the Air Force in towns surrounding the training area, many Nevadans repeat a refrain heard in the legislative hearings: Nevada has given enough.

“At some point, Nevada has to say, stop, we’re not just a desert that you can continue to take away from the citizens’ access,” Robin L. Titus, a Republican lawmaker, said at a hearing of the Committee on Natural Resources, Agriculture and Mining.

Critics of the expansion, especially conservative ones, say they support the need for military readiness and training. But they feel the federal government controls too much of the state’s land and have been urging the Air Force to look elsewhere. The airspace reserved for training is around three times the size of Connecticut and off-limits to commercial aircraft.

“There’s Utah, there’s northern Idaho, there’s areas that they could use for these fly areas and training,” John C. Ellison, another Republican member of the Nevada Assembly, said during the March hearings. “I don’t support any more taking of land and restricting of areas when we have so little now.”

Around 84 percent of land in Nevada is owned by the federal government, the [highest percentage](#) among the 50 states. In addition to the Air Force's training area, the Navy has the Fallon Range Training Complex in the northern high desert east of Reno, an area that the [Navy is seeking to expand](#) by 600,000 acres. The Energy Department controls an area around Yucca Mountain, which the Trump Administration is seeking to make the nation's permanent repository for nuclear waste, a long-disputed project in Nevada.

Colonel Craddock said Nevada gives the Air Force possibilities that no other state can offer.

"We have a large contiguous piece of land that is very sparsely populated," he said. And the terrain has the added advantage of resembling those of countries where the United States military often operates.

About half of the wildlife refuge — more than 800,000 acres — is already used by the Air Force.

The proximity of war simulations to the vast refuge can make for a jarring contrast. On a recent visit, the screech of a red-tail hawk was followed by the earthshaking sonic boom of a military jet.

"That's not thunder," said Amy Sprunger, an employee of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service who has served as the manager of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge for the past 18 years.

The sonic booms are so powerful that the Air Force has compensated homeowners in Alamo, Nev., a town on the edge of the refuge, for damage to their homes. At least four drones have crashed on the reserve during her tenure, said Ms. Sprunger, who is skeptical of the Air Force's claims that the expansion would not harm the refuge. Contractors for the Defense Department would have "free rein," she said. "There's no oversight," she said.

Credit Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times



Kish LaPierre, an archaeologist who is the cultural resource manager at Nellis Air Force Base, argues the opposite. She has documented 40 sites of rock carvings and paintings in the current Air Force training area, and she contends that if the Air Force obtains the extra 300,000 acres, they would be equally well protected under the National Historical Preservation Act, which requires a detailed cataloging of culturally significant sites.

Under the control of the Air Force, “things are better kept, easier to manage,” she said. “We don’t have the public coming out, unknowingly or knowingly damaging sites.”

Mr. Anderson, who is a former chairman of the Moapa Band of Paiutes, said he has seen evidence that the Air Force is not living up to its promises of protection. When he visited Pintwater cave, a site where archaeologists found artifacts — including part of a hunting tool that was estimated to be 6,500 years old — he saw missile fragments embedded near the entrance to the cave.

“They are supposed to be protecting our cultural resources,” Mr. Anderson said. “Is that protecting them — dropping a bomb on them?”

(Ms. LaPierre confirmed that pieces of ordnance had been found near the cave and were determined to be from bombs dropped during training in the 1960s, but she said that the cave was not damaged.)

The Air Force environmental impact assessment of the expansion includes a [joint analysis](#) by representatives of 17 tribes from Nevada, Arizona, Utah and California. The authors say they do not support “harmful land disturbing activities currently conducted or planned” within the Air Force training area.

For Mr. Anderson, who served in the Marine Corps for three years, the expansion has particular poignancy. His ancestors were ordered off the land in the 1800s onto a reservation that at one point shrank to just 1,000 acres. He bristles that he needs permission to visit his ancestral lands.

“We’re in a never-winning battle with the government,” he said.

Opposition to the Air Force expansion has brought together conservationists, outdoor-enthusiasts, Native American tribes and Nevadans who simply say they want more control over the land in their state.

Jose Witt, the Southern Nevada director of Friends of Nevada Wilderness, a conservation group, created a social media slogan, #DontBombTheBighorn, a reference to the sheep that roam the refuge.

“A lot of people think of the Mojave as a vast wasteland,” Mr. Witt said. “That’s a perception we are trying to change. It’s a hidden gem.”

Thomas Fuller is the San Francisco bureau chief. He has spent the past two decades in postings abroad for The Times and the International Herald Tribune in Europe and, most recently, in Southeast Asia. [@thomasfullerNYT](#) · [Facebook](#)