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Congress, Nevada Delegation Deny Long-Sought Military Expansions Onto Public Lands

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December 11, 2020 - A broad coalition of conservationists, Native Americans, sportsmen and women, elected officials and others are celebrating the Congressional vote today that denies the U.S. military its long sought-after expansions of two major facilities in Nevada, at the Fallon Naval Air Station and the Nellis Test and Training Range.

In passing the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), Congress instead approved language that maintains both facilities at their current size for the next 25 years. All six members of the Nevada Congressional delegation voted in favor of the NDAA with no military expansions.

The final vote capped a multi-year long battle to keep the military from expanding further onto more than a million acres of public land in northern and southern Nevada.

The NDAA, however, also includes language that suggests the battle is not over. Congress directed the Navy and the Air Force to continue to work with Nevada stakeholders to reach agreement on expansion plans.

“We are so grateful to our Congressional delegation for hearing the voices of their constituents and voting to protect our public lands,” said Friends of Nevada Wilderness Executive Director Shaaron Netherton. “This is a major victory for everyone who cares about protecting Nevada’s unique landscape, including ancestral lands and fragile wildlife habitat, and keeping it open to the public. We will remain vigilant, however, knowing the military will not give up on its plans to expand. In fact, now that Senators Cortez Masto and Rosen and Representatives Titus, Horsford, Lee and Amodei are all on record voting no on expansion, we will be back with even greater resolve to secure permanent protection for these lands, including Wilderness protection for the Desert National Wildlife Refuge.”

“Stopping the expansions of Fallon and Nellis Military bases is a huge win for Nevadans, Tribal Nations, public lands and wildlife. We are grateful that our Congressional delegation listened to so many Nevadans who wanted the Desert Refuge and Tribal lands protected— not bombed and irreversibly damaged,” said Connie Howard, Chair of Conservation and Public Lands at the Sierra Club Toiyabe Chapter. “We look forward to continuing work with Senator Cortez Masto and Representative Horsford who introduced wilderness protections for these places. Safeguarding them means we can increase Tribal access, preserve our natural resources, and ensure these places remain for the benefit of future generations.”

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“On behalf of the Moapa Band of Paiutes, we would like to thank all those who tirelessly gave their efforts and voice in this campaign to stop the Tuhut (Desert National Wildlife Refuge) land grab from military seizure,” said Greg Anderson Sr., Vice Chairman of the Moapa Band of Paiutes. “This is one victory we could not have done alone and we thank all the agencies, coalitions, tribes and the 32,000 individuals who submitted comments to the Air Force opposing the Desert refuge takeover. Our hearts are overwhelmed with gratitude on this victorious day and we send our prayers in the four directions to all those involved that you be blessed in all your efforts. We know there are many battles ahead of us and with your continued support we can stand together to protect our mother earth, wildlife, and the people who hold the land dearest to their hearts.”

“Public lands are a defining element of Nevada’s culture and heritage, and the attempted destruction of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge goes to the very heart of what it means to be a Nevadan,” said Nevada Conservation League Executive Director Paul Selberg. “We want to thank Senator Cortez Masto, Congressman Horsford, and all of Nevada’s Congressional Delegation in standing up for Nevada’s public lands and protecting against the destruction of the DNWR. We look forward to our continued work in protecting our public lands, and offer a warning against anyone that wishes to take away Nevada’s public lands again: we will fight you and we will win.”

Annette Magnus, Executive Director for Institute for a Progressive Nevada, said, "We’re overjoyed that Nevada’s Desert National Wildlife Refuge is left intact by the NDAA passed today. We thank Senators Catherine Cortez Masto and Jacky Rosen for voting for a bill that fully protects our pristine public lands and wildlife habitats from expansion by the military. Our bighorn sheep are unique to Nevada and too important environmentally and culturally to be collateral damage in weapons' testing. We look forward to continuing our work to permanently protect the Desert National Wildlife Refuge preserve and all of our public lands across our state for generations to come."

"Protecting and enhancing our wildlife resources within the Desert National Wildlife Refuge has long been among our highest priorities" said Larry Johnson, president of the Coalition for Nevada’s Wildlife, a sportsmen’s organization dealing with issues and policies that affect the state's wildlife and sporting traditions. "Wildlife refuges must be managed for wildlife above any other interest. Wildlife management has all but ceased in the areas of the Refuge already annexed. We cannot allow the remainder of the Refuge to be similarly impacted, particularly at a time when the desert bighorn sheep, our state animal, is in the recovery stage from the pandemic die off that threatened the very existence of this magnificent animal on the Refuge. We wish to thank our national delegation for their support in protecting the Refuge and the myriad of wildlife species that depend on these lands."

"Preventing the military expansion into the Desert National Wildlife Refuge and the landscape surrounding Fallon is great news for the sporting and outdoor community. These critical landscapes are home to a variety of game animals including our state animal, the Desert Bighorn Sheep. These animals provide one of the most unique hunting and wildlife viewing experiences in our state. With regards to the Air Force and Desert National Wildlife Refuge, the passing of the NDAA ensures that the U.S Fish and Wildlife Service still maintains primary jurisdiction over much of the refuge to support and manage our wildlife. This outcome could have not been accomplished without the collaboration between all public land conservation advocates and the Nevada delegation. We would like thank all those involved in helping keep Nevada’s public lands in public hands.” said Nevada Wildlife Federation’s Executive Director Russell Kuhlman.

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"After so much uncertainty, Nevadans can finally breathe easier knowing that the crafters of the NDAA chose to respect their wishes," said Levi Kamolnick, state director with Environment Nevada. "Credit goes to Nevada’s congressional delegation who strongly voiced the concerns of their constituents in Washington. It has been clear from the beginning that expansion into the Desert Refuge was an affront to all who cherish public lands -- from Nevada’s Tribal nations and its outdoor recreation community to each and every one of us who cares deeply about wildlife. We know that the work to protect the refuge isn’t over and more work must be done to achieve permanent protection, but we are heartened that Nevadans spoke with a clear and confident voice: The Desert National Wildlife Refuge must be here to stay."

Friends is joining a number of coalition members in encouraging Nevadans to call their representatives in Congress to thank them for denying the military expansions and to urge them to continue to vote against further military expansion onto public lands.

Thousands of Nevadans have voiced opposition to the military expansion plans, including nearly 32,000 who submitted public comments on the Air Force plan to further expand into the Desert National Wildlife Refuge. Hundreds also showed up at public meetings around the state.

The Intertribal Council of Nevada, representing 27 member reservations and colonies, had adopted a resolution opposing all military expansion onto their ancestral lands.

In a July, 2020, letter to two House Committee Chairs, Governor Steve Sisolak wrote, “...let me be very clear. I stand with the Nevada Congressional delegation, the citizens of Nevada, and the sovereign tribal governments in Nevada in opposing any expansion of Nellis AFB that would undermine the integrity of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge...”

And with solid bipartisan support from urban and rural representatives, the Nevada Legislature in early 2019 adopted resolutions which urged Congress to reject both proposed expansions.

“Congress just said no to the military because Nevadans are united in their opposition to military takeovers of our public lands,” Netherton concluded.

If the current Congress does not have the time or the votes to override a threatened presidential veto of the NDAA, the new Congress, which convenes January 3, would have to reintroduce and vote again on the bill.

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