

BY WYNNE BENTI

NEAR LAS VEGAS, TRAGEDY BREWS FOR DESERT NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

DESERT BIGHORN THREATENED BY MILITARY EXPANSION. LEGISLATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT OPENS FOR PUBLIC REVIEW DECEMBER 2017

In the heart of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge, north of Las Vegas, the Sheep Range is home to one of the *most isolated and biologically diverse communities in the Mojave Desert*. Sheltered by massive Paleozoic limestone walls, large populations of native and migratory wildlife emerge after dark and thrive, protected by the refuge status. They gather at springs, travel within canyons, and climb along ridges forested with bristlecone pines and mixed conifers.

Named for the species it was created to protect, the Sheep Range is slated to become part the Nevada Test and Training Range as both a training area and as an expanded safety zone for the United States Air Force's high-altitude missile launches. This would be done through a Legislative Environmental Impact Statement (LEIS) to be considered by Congress.

At stake . . .

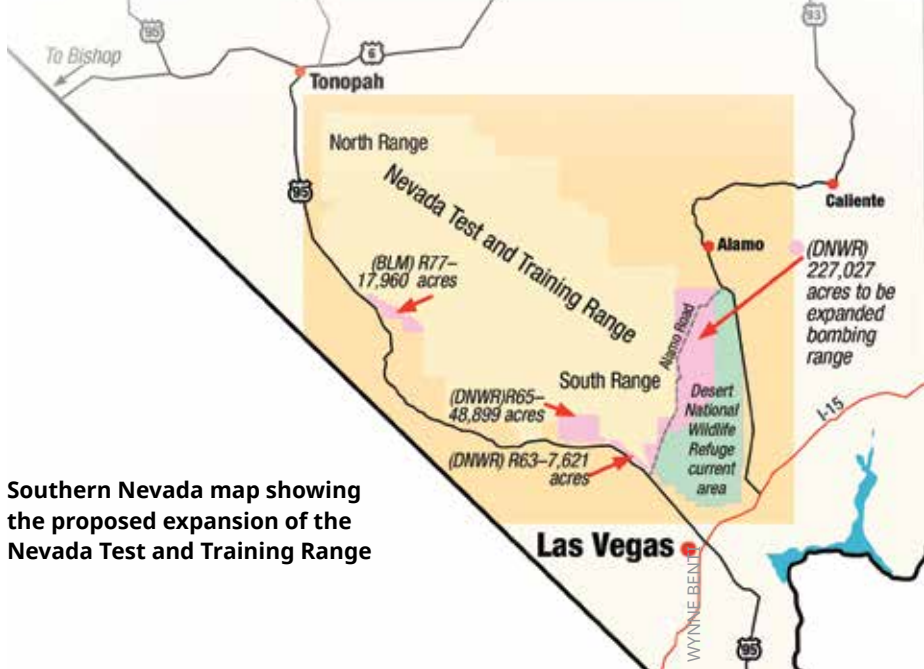
East of Pahrump and the Spring Mountains, the Desert National Wildlife Refuge is the last public lands buffer between Las Vegas city limits and the 2.9 million-acre Nevada Test and Training Range (NTTR) operated by the United States Air Force. During the 2016 scoping period, the Air Force proposed to withdraw 301,507 acres of public lands, most of it from the refuge. With the expansion, jets will be able to fly directly from Nellis Air Force

Base over the Sheep Range into the Test & Training Range's South (bombing) Range without having to zig-zag around public lands or restricted areas. Moveable threat emitters simulating enemy fire will be installed within the Sheep Range, and the range itself will serve as a catch-basin for high-altitude missiles that stray off target.

At present, 846,000 acres have already been withdrawn from Desert National Wildlife Refuge for Air Force use. The proposed expansion, in conjunction with the Navy's looming 669,949-acre expansion at the Fallon Range and Training Center east of Reno (EIS to be released in 2018), will rank Nevada number one as the state with the most military-dedicated acreage—4.5 million acres—outranking California at 3.8 million acres.

The USGS report, *Hydroclimate of the Spring Mountains and Sheep Range, Clark County, Nevada*, describes the Sheep Range's high elevation communities as "sky islands," noting that the sky islands harbor more than forty-one percent of the endemic species in the Mojave Desert Ecoregion. 550 million years in the making, and evolved from the Paleozoic Age, the extraordinary biological communities of the Sheep Range have adapted both to the arid Mojave Desert and to the Basin and Range Physiographic Province.

The Nevada Test and Training Range dates to World War II when environmental awareness and concern were quite different from the present. Because the Range is off-limits to the public, we don't know the extent of the contamination inside. If California bases are an example, contaminants were buried, dumped or released on the ground, in the air, and in



Southern Nevada map showing the proposed expansion of the Nevada Test and Training Range

the water.

Of the 98 EPA Superfund sites in California, twenty-six are operated by the military, their contractors, or the Department of Energy. Of those, nine are operated by the Air Force, and at those bases, soil and groundwater have been contaminated by volatile organic compounds (VOCs), metals, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), battery acids, leaded fuels, industrial solvents, caustic cleansers, paints, metal plating wastes, low-level radioactive wastes, a variety of fuel oils and lubricants, dioxins, heavy metals, acids, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). These toxins have been linked to cancer in humans.

These would be in addition to arsenic and tungsten which already occur naturally in Nevada's groundwater and soils. Tungsten exposure, like that seen in Fallon, has been linked to reproductive and developmental effects such as decreased sperm motility, increased embryotoxicity, and delayed fetal skeletal ossification in animals. (Agency for Toxic Substances & Disease Registry, Toxicological Profile for Tungsten 12 (2005), <http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxprofiles/tp186.pdf>)

Unlike the final decision on an Environmental Impact Statement, which is made by a land management agency, a LEIS is decided by Congress. Unless the rules change, Congress will act on this in 2021.

Of the five alternatives introduced during last year's scoping period, alternatives 1 and 4 are preferred by US Fish and Wildlife Service and by a wide range of desert advocates.

The proposed alternatives . . .

Alternative (1) will preserve the "status quo"—leaving things as they are now. However, the time period for this arrangement would be extended (without adding any additional acreage); the Air Force will manage the range as they always have. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will continue as the lead managing agency of the refuge. Most importantly, the 227,027 acres of refuge lands encompassing the Sheep Range, will not be withdrawn for military use.

Alternative (2) will make no changes to the current NTTR land boundary. It will provide the Air Force with increased



access for military activities in the South Range. This may involve changes in Proposed Wilderness status, changes in primary jurisdiction for who manages the lands, or development of future agreements with specific legislative provisions for military use. *Of note, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service currently has primary jurisdiction and is the reason that the South Range and its inhabitants are still intact.*

Alternative (3) will expand the existing withdrawal by including up to 301,507 additional acres, via three sub-alternative public land acquisitions:

3A: Increases NTTR boundary to add the R77 Expansion—17,960 acres; no munitions use or construction disturbance would occur in R77.

3B: Increases NTTR boundary to add 56,520 acres, combining the R64C/D Expansion (referred to as Creech/Box Canyon/R63 on the website) at 7,621 acres and the R65D Expansion at 48,899 acres.

3C: Increases NTTR boundary to add the Alamo Expansion—227,027 acres in the Desert National Wildlife Refuge, including most of the Sheep Range, which will become the safety buffer for the South (bombing) Range. No new target impact areas are *currently* proposed. Portable threat emitters simulating enemy fire would be placed within the Sheep Range.

Alternative (4) offers three time limits (20-year, 50-year, or indefinite) for the military withdrawals. Those timeframes could apply to the existing 2.9 million acre NTTR in its current boundaries or to any of the proposed new (3A, B, C) withdrawal alternatives and would begin up-on the expiration of the existing withdrawal period scheduled to end November 5, 2021.

Alternative (5) is the No Action Alternative. It would return NTTR lands to the Department of the Interior when the currently legislated withdrawal expires November 5, 2021.

Speaking on behalf of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Desert National Wildlife Refuge Complex Project Leader, Christy Smith said, "We strongly support the Air Force Mission, but are concerned about any proposal that could diminish our ability to manage wildlife and their habitats or would decrease or inhibit public access in any way. We want to limit military expansion into Desert National Wildlife Refuge."

Alternative 3 and its sub-alternatives, particularly 3C, will strip 227,027 acres from the Desert National Wildlife Refuge, mostly from the Sheep Range. All public access will

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DESERT FORUM

If you find *Desert Report* interesting, sign up for the CNRCC Desert Committee's e-mail Listserv, Desert Forum. Here you'll find open discussions of items interesting to desert lovers. Many articles in this issue of *Desert Report* were developed through Forum discussions. Electronic subscribers will continue to receive current news on these issues — plus the opportunity to join in the discussions and contribute their own insights. Desert Forum runs on a Sierra Club Listserv system.

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NEXT DESERT COMMITTEE MEETINGS

WINTER MEETING
FEBRUARY 10 & 11, 2018

The winter meeting is a joint one with the Sierra Club Wilderness Committee. It will take place in Shoshone, CA, and will be chaired by Terry Frewin and Ann Henny.

SPRING MEETING
MAY 19 & 20, 2018

This meeting will be held at the Black Canyon group camp in the Mojave National Preserve. Chair is yet to be determined.

RENNETT STOWE, CREATIVE COMMONS

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end. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will lose at least 95% of its current access and most of its ability to monitor wildlife within the range, as the Air Force will control all access.

Communities come together in opposition to the expansion

Between Las Vegas and Tonopah, Alamo Road is the only public north-south road from US Hwy. 95 at Corn Creek Station, to US 93, near Alamo, Nevada, and it provides the only vehicular access to the Sheep Range. If Alternatives 3A, B, and C prevail, most of Alamo Road will close. With no viable access to the Sheep Range, the area will be under Air Force control. Only a short stretch of road will remain open to the public, eastbound, from Corn Creek Station to Hidden Forest Road.

In 1936, Congress set aside 1.615 million acres for the Desert National Wildlife Refuge to protect the desert bighorn sheep. When the Air Force introduced its plan to the public in 2016, it was one of the rare times that the ranching, farming, hunting, environmental, and off-road communities came together to oppose the expansion.

The Air Force has many excellent alternatives and expanding into the Desert National Wildlife Refuge and the Sheep Range is not one. Now is the time to let Senators and Representatives know, *relentlessly*, that taking a third of a million acres from the Desert National Wildlife Refuge for the base expansion is not an option. Once the boundary lines are redrawn, the public will lose all contact with the valuable wildlife communities. Eventually, the land will change and not for the better. The Sheep Range, gem of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge will be lost forever.

Past Chairperson of the Angeles Chapter Rivers Conservation Subcommittee and Los Angeles River Task Force, Wynne Benti currently works with the Toiyabe Chapter's Public Lands Committee on military expansions and DOE projects.

TAKE ACTION

The public can comment on the Nevada Test and Training Range Legislative Environmental Statement scheduled for release in December 2017 online at: <http://www.nttrleis.com/>

Tentative public meeting dates are set for January 2018. Be sure to check the website for updated info:

- Jan. 17 - Caliente, NV (Caliente Elementary School)
- Jan. 18 - Alamo, NV (Pahranagat Valley High School)
- Jan. 23 - Las Vegas (Aliante Casino + Hotel)
- Jan. 24 - Beatty, NV (Beatty Community Center)
- Jan. 25 - Tonopah, NV (Tonopah Convention Center)

Tentative hours:

- 5:30-6:15 pm (open house/written comments)
- 6:15-7:00 pm (USAF presentation)
- 7:00-9:00 pm (hearing/verbal comments)