

## **NEWS RELEASE** from *Peaceful Chiricahua Skies*

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# **Air Force Proposes 8,000 Low-Level Training Flights Annually Over Southeast Arizona**

## ***Draft Environmental Impact Study Released — Comments Due by October 9***

Portal, AZ— Today, the U.S. Air Force (USAF) released a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for Regional Special Use Airspace Optimization to Support Air Force Missions in Arizona. This will be available for public review and comment through October 9, 2024.

According to Karen Fasimpaur, a volunteer with Peaceful Chiricahua Skies, a coalition informing the public about this proposal, “What is new in the DEIS are details on the number of sorties, or training missions, to be flown over the region. The apparently preferred DEIS alternative includes a dramatic increase from the current 3,460 annual sorties to 8,000 annual sorties in the Tombstone MOA alone.”

Other groups have expressed major concerns as well. “As an organization pledged to protect intact habitats and help sustain biodiversity in our region, we at the Chiricahua Regional Council (CRC) believe that the potential impacts resulting from this expansion will be profound,” said Dirk Sigler, CRC’s Executive Director. “By increasing their training flights more than two-fold and allowing for flights as low as 100 feet above our homes, the Air Force will effectively turn our skies into a war zone.”

The DEIS includes the same alternatives for increased military training in the Tombstone MOA (Military Operations Area) as were published in the Air Force’s original scoping proposal. “This DEIS will be a great disappointment to the many concerned citizens who previously submitted comments opposing the expansion of high-decibel, low-level training flights over residential, commercial, and wild areas of southeast Arizona and southwest New Mexico,” Fasimpaur said.

Under the likely preferred alternative, sorties in the Tombstone MOA, located in Cochise County in Arizona’s southeast corner and also in neighboring Hidalgo County, in New Mexico’s Bootheel area, would increase by 132%. In addition, 1% of those flights, or approximately 80 per year, would be supersonic, resulting in sonic booms from as low as 5,000 feet, down from the current 30,000 feet.

Also new in the DEIS is a statement that the USAF is planning to shift current flights from the Barry M. Goldwater Range East restricted areas to the MOAs, with the Tombstone MOA apparently receiving the bulk of these re-located flights. This proposal is intended to make the Goldwater Range available for more hazardous training.

The DEIS also includes lowering the altitude of flights in the Tombstone MOA to just 100 feet above ground level, dropping non-biodegradable chaff, and releasing flares from 2,000 feet above ground, increasing chances for fire.

The PCS campaign has generated more than 2,200 individual petition signatures calling for the withdrawal of the plan and has enlisted dozens of local organizations in opposition. The [peacefulchiricahuaskies.org](http://peacefulchiricahuaskies.org) website provides resources and background information about the Air Force proposal.

The USAF is holding official public hearings on this issue; however, says Fasimpaur, “None of these are in Cochise County, one of the most affected areas, where public hearings are urgently needed.” (See [www.arizonaregionalairspaceeis.com/](http://www.arizonaregionalairspaceeis.com/) for a schedule of these hearings, as well as the DEIS document

itself.) PCS is also planning a series of informational comment-writing workshops to help concerned citizens write the “substantive comments” that the USAF requires.

The Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) is also opposing this plan and recently sued the U.S. Air Force under the Freedom of Information Act for failing to release public records about the proposed expansion of military flights over southeast Arizona and southwest New Mexico. FOIA responses from the USAF to date have not been complete, and CBD plans to continue fighting for this information.

While a vigorous response to the USAF proposal has come from the community in the Portal, Arizona and Rodeo, New Mexico areas, the region to be affected by the expansion proposal represents a much larger area. According to the training boundaries shown in proposed USAF maps, the Tombstone MOA portion of the proposal would expand to include much of eastern Cochise County, AZ plus the entire Bootheel of New Mexico, including Douglas, Bisbee, and Portal in AZ, and Rodeo, Animas, and Playas in NM. Several other MOAs in Arizona and New Mexico are also included in this proposal, with significant impacts on Tribal lands.

See [peacefulchiricahuaskies.org](http://peacefulchiricahuaskies.org) for more details.

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