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Submitted Via Public Comment Portal: <https://www.arizonaregionalairspaceeis.com/comments>

October 4, 2024

Arizona Regional Airspace EIS  
c/o Stantec  
501 Butler Farm Rd., Suite H  
Hampton, VA 23666

RE: Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS): Regional Special Use Airspace Optimization to Support Air Force Missions in Arizona

To Whom It May Concern:

The New Mexico State Land Office (NMSLO) is providing the following comments in response to the August 2024 Draft Environmental Impact Statement: Regional Special Use Airspace Optimization to Support Air Force Missions in Arizona. While the NMSLO appreciates the importance of fostering combat-credible military forces to protect our national security, the draft EIS raises significant concerns.

The Department of the Air Force (DAF) is proposing 39,000 average annual sorties (with 64,600 total flight hours), primarily in undeveloped wilderness and rural areas, and the lowering of flight altitude in certain parts. This creates substantial concerns regarding the fire risk associated with the deployment of flares. As the EIS acknowledges, flares, which are ejected from aircraft to mislead heat-sensitive or heat seeking targeting systems, may reach the ground or vegetation while still burning. Defensive flares typically burn out in 3.5 to 5 seconds (falling between 200 and 400 feet), and the DAF intends to reduce the risk of fires by generally establishing minimum altitudes for flare release of 2,000 feet AGL. However, considering one of the key goals of the proposal is to establish more low-altitude training missions (which includes the lowering of the release altitudes for flares compared to the status quo) and some of the Military Operation Areas (MOAs) include airspace parameters as low as 100 feet AGL, the fire risk associated flare use increases under the proposed action. Reducing flight altitude parameters in conjunction with flare use reduces the safety margin, and the draft EIS fails to adequately account for how this margin would be impacted by the likelihood of user error in flare releases that are below minimum altitudes.

Moreover, the expanded use of chaff in countermeasure exercises results in more waste spread across the natural landscape. A bundle of chaff consists of approximately 5 to 5.6 million aluminum-coated silica fibers, that when deployed, create an electronic “cloud” that allows the maneuvering aircraft to hide from radar detection. Each chaff bundle has a 1-inch by 1-inch felt spacer that falls to the ground along with two 1-inch square plastic end caps. While the actual amount of debris may be small in any one particular occurrence, considering that the proposed chaff bundle average annual usage exceeds 130,000, the cumulative impact of this waste product disposal on our natural landscapes over the decades the MOAs are utilized would be substantial.

The NMSLO also notes that the supersonic booms associated with the sorties have a negative impact on recreational users, who are key to New Mexico’s outdoor economy, and can create a risk for cultural resources and other sensitive structures. Increased flights, the lowering of flight altitude parameters and the expansion of some MOA boundaries, would only increase the risk associated with sonic booms.

Additionally, the draft EIS fails to sufficiently consider and analyze impacts to New Mexico state trust lands. While input was sought from various agencies in New Mexico under the purview of the Governor, the process employed did not consider the fact that state trust lands are independently managed and controlled by the New Mexico Commissioner of Public Lands. The draft EIS does not distinguish between state trust lands and state lands in general, which resulted in scoping letters and the overall process failing to include the appropriate elected official positioned to respond as it pertains to state trust lands.

Lastly, we request that the DAF extend the public comment period by at least 60 days to provide impacted communities and stakeholders a more meaningful opportunity to share their concerns. I am deeply concerned that some New Mexico communities were not adequately apprised of this proposal at its onset.

If you have any questions regarding this correspondence, please contact my office at 505-827-5760.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Stephanie". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Stephanie Garcia Richard  
Commissioner of Public Lands