

Air Force Calls for Radical Expansion of Southwest Combat Training Airspace

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More sonic booms, more roaring low altitude fighter jets, That's what's in store for us if the Air Force implements its current proposal to expand its Regional Special Use Airspace Optimization (RSUAO) plan.

If adopted as proposed in its Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), daily lives of residents and visitors, as well as domestic and wild animals throughout southeast Arizona and southwest New Mexico would be subject to a radical increase in breadth, duration and decibels of military intrusion.

The DEIS calls for RSUAO expansion throughout the southwest, including the Tombstone Military Operations Area (TMOA), comprised of some 4000 square miles, including Douglas, Bisbee, the Dragoon and Chiricahua Mountains, Sulphur Springs and Animas Valleys, wildlife preserves, National Monuments and more cities and towns, residential, commercial and agricultural properties, wildlands and preserves throughout the Southwest,

Many groups and individuals, from the Arizona Pilot's Association, to the Center for Biological Diversity, to Peaceful Chiricahua Skies, have expressed serious concerns about the proposed expansions. For instance, the director of the Chiricahua Regional Council has said, "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."

This isn't a new issue. As early as 1979, I and others were complaining to our congresspeople, Davis-Monthan command, and southern Arizona media about fighter jets in the TMOA.

One piece I wrote then was titled, "Close Enough to Shake a Stick At," noting that whether breaking official altitude limits or in the absence of decent limits, the planes were seriously interfering with ("invading" is not too strong a word) the way of life and general peace of mind of what was, in effect, a target population.

As I recall, though nothing was announced publicly about it, the most egregious of the aural insults were abated and have more or less remained so -- at least in my own neck of the MOA. There are still occasional sonic booms and high-decibel roars, but the proposed expansions would greatly increase booms, roars and litter from non-biodegradable chaff (materials released to confuses enemy radar) and flares (increasing chances for fire).

But the current expansion would produce far more disruption than we experienced 40 years ago, far more letters to the Air Force and Congresspeople will be needed to stop it.

If adopted, this proposal would dramatically lower training altitudes for these areas The proposal for increased airspace and use **in our area** would allow a dramatic 132% **increase in the number of more** fighter jet sorties—*well over twice as many*—increasing from **3,450** to 8,000 flights per year in **the our TMOA** airspace. We have not had sonic booms in our airspace until now, but **of those flights with the proposal, we'd have** approximately **11 per year** (a one percent increase) **would be supersonic, with sonic booms** from as low as 5,000 feet—**dramatically closer than the current 30,000-foot feet minimum altitude limit.**

[Table 2.2-3 (p45) we'd have 1,100 supersonic aircraft flights per year with 1% of those causing sonic booms = total of 11 sonic booms per year in the TMOA? Slightly less than 1 sonic boom per month? Please review table below. Am I reading that correctly?]

Table 2.2-3 Proposed Annual Sorties – Alternative 2

MOA/ATCAA	No Action	Proposed							Change from No Action	
		Davis-Monthan AFB	Morris ANGB	Luke AFB		Other ¹	Total Local	Transient ²		Grand Total
		A-10	F-16	F-16	F-35					
Tombstone	3,450	6,600	1,100	0	0	150	7,850	150	8,000	+4,550
Outlaw/Jackal	5,190	2,100	3,400	20	750	40	6,310	300	6,610	+1,420
Morenci/Reserve	3,350	850	2,900	0	150	0	3,900	150	4,050	+700
Gladden/Bagdad	6,920	20	0	1,600	7,300	0	8,920	200	9,120	+2,200
Sells	14,790	350	3,100	1,400	11,600	60	16,510	1,300	17,810	+3,020
Ruby/Fuzzy	5,490	2,300	4,200	20	850	40	7,410	200	7,610	+2,120

Notes: ¹Other includes non-fighter aircraft stationed in Arizona (EC-130Hs, HC-130Js, HH-60Gs).

²Transients include DAF units stationed outside Arizona and other U.S. military. Type of aircraft varies but can include other fighter aircraft such as AV-8B, F-35, F-22, and F-18; helicopters such as MV-22 and H-60; and cargo aircraft such as C-130.

Legend: AFB = Air Force Base; ANGB = Air National Guard Base; ATCAA = Air Traffic Control Assigned Airspace; DAF = Department of the Air Force; MOA = Military Operations Area.

Table 2.2-4 Proposed Nighttime and Supersonic Sorties – Alternative 2

MOA/ATCAA	Percent Day/Night ¹		Percent Including Supersonic ²	
	No Action	Proposed	No Action	Proposed
Tombstone	89/11	No change	0	1
Outlaw/Jackal	89/11	No change	12	14
Morenci/Reserve	90/10	No change	11	No change
Gladden/Bagdad	88/12	No change	65	66
Sells	85/15	No change	60	No change
Ruby/Fuzzy	90/10	No change	0	No change

Note: ¹Night sorties are those flights that occur after sunset.

²Supersonic speed does not occur for the duration of the sortie.

Legend: ATCAA = Air Traffic Control Assigned Airspace; MOA = Military Operations Area.

Originally published in a proposal for increased combat training in the Tombstone MOA, the proposal has recently been repeated in a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) proposing to similarly expand the RSUAO (including the airspace in several other MOAs) over residential, commercial, and wild areas in Cochise and Hidalgo County counties. [Can you fact-check this? I don't know where to find this other DEIS.]

The DEIS also notes that the USAF Air Force is planning to shift current flights from the Barry M. Goldwater Range East in southwest Arizona to other MOAs, with the our Tombstone MOA—it seems—receiving the bulk of these relocated flights. [Can you fact-check this? I don't know where to find this other DEIS.]

This shift is particularly striking in that it is directly the opposite to of what should be done: Namely, relocating flights should be relocated from the our TMOA to the long-established, people-scarce 1.9 million acres and 57,000 cubic airspace miles of the Goldwater Range which is large enough (and convenient enough to for DM and other bases) to. This would easily accommodate the increased heavy and light combat training the AF Air Force wants.

To put it mildly, abrupt, unexpected, extreme noise, literally out of the blue, is unhealthy for humans as well as domestic and wild animals, can affect architecture and property values, and affect tourism. It's unwanted, unnecessary and unacceptable. The untoward detrimental physical and mental effects of loud, unexpected noises like sonic booms and low-flying screaming fighter

jets are well-documented in medical literature, not least from the VA and the military's own files.

It is no secret that for at least half a century the Air Force has been deploying fighter jets ~~for exactly that purpose,~~ using low-altitude high-decibel noise as a weapon of war to frighten and otherwise disorient targeted groups, civilian populations in particular. And they can be frightening as anyone can testify who has been literally shaken awake in a home or motel near an airport when a jet plane taking off or coming in for a landing ~~or takein~~ [I can't find what takein means].

And it's well to keep in mind that training flights do sometimes crash, and have crashed in Cochise Co. in the recent past.

Military reservations occupy hundreds of square miles in Arizona. Ft Huachuca covers about 120 [Google says 115] square miles. Add to (or include in) that the area covered by special influence zones like the Ft Huachuca Sentinel Landscae Area (c. 1000 sq. miles besides the Fort itself), [I'm not finding fact-checking info on this 1000 sq mi.] an intersectoral project established primarily to protect the Fort's electronics operations.

There are 28 MOAs in Arizona, with spillover into adjacent states. The Tombstone MOA, for instance, includes airspace over parts of New Mexico, including Animas, Hatchita and nearby country.

The TMOA presently covers almost 4000 square miles (of course, overlapping with the Fort's acreage at large and the SVRA). If expanded as proposed, it would cover 4766 square miles, about a 19% increase. Cochise Co. encompasses about 6210 sq. miles.

The FAA also designates Restricted Airspace zones (RAs) (largely overlapping with ZMOAs and where general air traffic is restricted according to military parameters. Around the Sierra Vista airport, for instance, the 946 sq mile RA is very highly restricted.)

In terms of just amount of land, MOAs add considerably to the area of direct military influence.

The AF could of course save significant operating costs by keeping D-M flights closer to home, i.e., over Tucson and environs. But that would, of course, be politically infeasible, as well as too risky in terms of damage to life, limb and property from crashes and other potential costs.

MOAs are generally not located over urban or other densely-populsted areas because air traffic and other potential interference with operations are greater there, but also because they are largely unacceptable to urban and suburban voters.

The TMOA is typical in being located in a thinly populated (i.e., comparatively few votes) region of largely low-income small farming and ranching communities. But of course there's something highly undemocratic, and unfair, about putting on minorities a burden (cf., risk) refused by majorities. These days, such social inequity is increasingly considered under the heading of Environmental Justice.

The DEIS is available online at: <https://www.arizonaregionalairspaceis.com/documents/>.
Hardcopy is available at Bisbee, Douglas, Portal, Huachuca City and Sunsites libraries.
The public review and comment period runs through 9 October 2024.

Contrary to National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirements, the Air Force has not scheduled any in-person public meetings in our area. They have allowed for virtual meetings (i.e., meetings via computer hook-up), but those are of course useless to a significant number of people, especially in rural areas, who do not have a computer, or lack technical skills to access virtual programs, are in marginal areas or otherwise without reliable connectivity, or, as is the case with many, are just not comfortable with virtual meetings.

For more information, including guidance on writing comments, requesting in-person meetings, etc., visit the Chirichaua Peaceful Skies website: <https://peacefulchirichauaskies.com/action/>