

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 26, 2024

Hon. Frank Kendall
Secretary of the Air Force
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20330-1670

Gen. David W. Allvin
Air Force Chief of Staff
1670 Air Force Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20330-1670

Dear Secretary Kendall and General Allvin:

On August 9, 2024, the Air Force published the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Regional Special Use Airspace Optimization to support Air Force Missions in Arizona and New Mexico. This announcement formally opened the window for public review and comment up until October 9, 2024, as well as in-person and virtual hearings for constituents to provide feedback. These hearings are imperative to ensuring our constituents are informed of the proposed changes and that they are afforded the opportunity to voice feedback and concerns. We write to share our concerns regarding the proposed changes to the Reserve, Morenci and Tombstone Military Operations Areas (MOAs) and request that you extend the public comment deadline for an additional 60 days.

An extension is crucial to ensuring our constituents are afforded the opportunity to provide meaningful comments on the proposal. While these public hearings were announced on the EIS Air Force website, we are concerned the Air Force did not effectively nor actively publicize the draft EIS nor the dates and locations of the public hearings in Reserve, Lordsburg, Animas, and Silver City, New Mexico, and surrounding areas that could be impacted by the proposed changes as well. During the initial 2022 scoping period, we urged the Air Force to expand public hearing locations and the manner in which you publicly circulated notice of public hearings being held, especially in rural locations where access to reliable internet can be sparse. We appreciate your willingness to heed our concerns during the scoping period and urge you to extend the current public comment period for these same reasons.

Additionally, posting the public notice in the Federal Register is not enough. The lack of sufficient notice and the abbreviated public comment period makes it difficult for interested parties to understand the proposal, digest the available information, and identify concerns. Therefore, we also urge you to conduct a robust outreach plan to our communities directly impacted and surrounding the direct impact areas.

Finally, the Air Force needs to widen the aperture for engagement with respect to communities that will be impacted by this action. Many small towns around the effected MOAs are interconnected. This means that even those who do not live directly under the airspace utilize the impacted land for hunting, recreation and other purposes.


While we understand and support the Air Force's requirement to effectively train aircrew and maintain combat readiness, it is important to note that this Airspace Optimization project proposes changes that will affect

airspace over the Gila National Forest, Coronado National Forest, and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) lands in southwestern New Mexico's Bootheel Region.

In particular, we have serious concerns over the proposed changes that will significantly lower the altitude floors for aircraft flying at supersonic speeds from 30,000 feet Above Ground Level (AGL) to 10,000 feet AGL or 5,000 feet AGL, respectively. The draft EIS does not adequately protect the dozens of endangered and threatened species that live in habitat below the airspace. In addition, we are concerned about the proposed changes for the Tombstone MOA to lower altitude floors to 100 feet AGL. This will allow military aircraft to fly low-level sorties over BLM wilderness areas in southwestern New Mexico. Lastly, we are deeply concerned about the use of flares at the proposed 2,000 feet AGL, down from the current 5,000 feet AGL, creating a dangerous threat of fires in hard-to-reach terrain.

We remain committed to supporting the Air Force's mission and necessity to train aircrew and maintain readiness. As you proceed through the EIS process, we urge you to extend the public comment deadline for an additional 60 days to ensure the public is given full opportunity to provide comment and feedback, conduct a robust outreach plan for New Mexicans in the impacted areas and adjacent to impacted areas, and expand public hearing locations to areas adjacent to impacted areas.

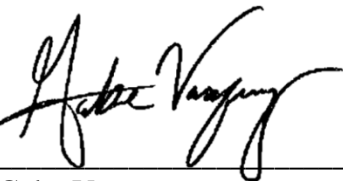
Sincerely,



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



Ben Ray Luján
United States Senator



Gabe Vasquez
Member of Congress