

# F-16 Training over the Gila

Community Input to the Environmental Impact Statement

FEBRUARY 2019



**LACK OF  
RESPONSE  
TO  
CITIZENS'  
CONCERNS**

**This paper covers: 1) Lack of Adherence to Military Airspace and Training Route Limits; 2) Lack of an Accountable Organization for Dealing with Citizens' Complaints; and 3) Concerns Regarding Future Accountability.**

**Citizens are experiencing aircraft flying at low levels and high speed over their neighborhoods in rural areas of southwest New Mexico. Unfortunately, they do not know how to report what they believe are violations of existing military operating areas (MOAs) and military training routes (MTRs). Attributing this to the fact of multiple users in these military training areas, the Air Force has not been accountable for these nuisance flights. Before the Air Force authorizes the establishment or expansion of additional MOAs over sensitive public lands in the Gila Region, including significant pristine wilderness areas and over any private lands, it needs to ensure the enforcement of flight rules that protect the public and develop a robust accountability process to address citizens' concerns.**

## **1. Lack of Adherence to Altitude Limits and Avoidance Areas In Military Airspace and on Military Training Routes**

In November 2017, there was a cluster of low-level F-16 sightings over several communities along the Gila River Valley in Grant County, New Mexico. In addition, a grass fire was ignited around the village of Cliff, New Mexico, after local ranchers reported seeing a flare of some sort come off a large military aircraft. Lastly, A-10 Warthogs were seen flying low throughout the Gila region both during the day and the evening.

## **Peaceful Gila Skies**

A coalition of business and community leaders, sportsmen and concerned citizens, united in our goal of protecting the Gila Region from military aircraft training.

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At the same time, the Air Force had just completed its formal scoping period for special use airspace optimization for the Holloman Air Force Base F-16 fighter jet training, including an alternative to create a new Military Operating Area (MOA) over the Gila as part of their Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process. This alternative could add even more military aircraft traffic into the area from Holloman AFB.

There are many users of existing MOAs and military training routes (MTRs). For example, in addition to its own training in the Outlaw, Jackal, Morenci, and Reserve MOAs, Holloman Air Force Base hosts “snowbird users” -- other military air organizations that come to the Southwest during winter months. The Arizona Air National Guard also hosts Foreign Military Sales (FMS) users -- allied and friendly nations who buy US military equipment and training support. Allied partners, such as the Taiwan Air Force, are an example of such FMS users.

VR-176, a low-level MTR in southwest New Mexico, has many official users (see Map 1 below). There is an avoidance area of 2000 feet AGL over the entire Gila Wilderness; but military aircraft, such as F-16s, are commonly observed flying in the vicinity of the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument at much lower levels, perhaps as low as 100 feet AGL.

**Map 1 (Note: the red lines outline and trace the VR-176 MTR)**



### **Official Users of VR-176 in 2017**

Altus AFB  
 Camp Pendleton  
 Canada  
 Cannon AFB  
 China Lake AWS  
 Davis-Monthan AFB  
 Dyess AFB  
 Holloman AFB  
 Kirtland AFB  
 Little Rock AFB  
 March AFB  
 NAS Beaufort  
 NAS Kingsville  
 NAS Miramar  
 NAS Oceana  
 NAS Whidbey Island  
 Stewart ANG  
 Tulsa ANG

Image and list of users from 2018 FOIA request by Center for Biological Diversity

There are also “informal” users of VR-176 as represented by the following internet exchange:

<https://forums.flightinfo.com/>

*Guys,*

*We're putting together a weekend trip with some guys from my squadron to get some low-level training in, and we're discussing where to go and where the best low level routes are. Everyone seems to wanna go to Colorado or Arizona, any suggestions? Spectacular routes? [Name deleted]*

*Oh yeah, close to a good party town too!*

*If you're passing through ABQ, try VR-176. It begins about 45 miles west of ABQ, and covers much of southwestern New Mexico. It's up to 40 NM wide in some points, **so it's like having a low-level MOA.** [Emphasis added.] It also has multiple alternate entry/exit points, which is nice for planning purposes. It covers some pretty isolated and rugged parts of the southern Rockies. I believe the New Mexico ANG owns the route, so call them prior to a weekend to book it.*

*There are some nice IR routes in northern NM, mostly owned by the 27 FW at Cannon AFB. They also cover some really high terrain, but the routes tend to be narrow.*

*I haven't flown much in AZ. I've flown some nice low-levels behind Pike's Peak and down past the Sangre de Cristo range in southern CO. These routes are owned by the CO ANG at Buckley AFB. They may be closed due to noise complaints, but if you can get on them, they are great.*

*Cheers!*

### Close View of VR-176: “At 500 feet ‘give or take a few.’” (From YouTube)



VR176 River Run

## 2. Lack of an Accountable Organization for Dealing with Citizen Complaints of Nuisance Flights in the Gila Region

FAA Albuquerque Center has oversight of the airspace that comprises the Outlaw, Jackal, Morenci, Reserve, and Cato/Smitty MOAs and the MTRs in southwest New Mexico, but it does not schedule these MOAs and MTRs or manage complaints about MOA and MTR violations. Those complaints must go to the individual bases that control scheduling for these MOAs and MTRs. But to whom do citizens send their complaints? Holloman AFB? Kirtland AFB? Arizona Air National Guard at Tucson International Airport? Davis-Monthan AFB? Luke AFB? Others?

An effort was begun in Grant County to try and determine the base of origin for the military aircraft seen over the region. Despite going through the formal online complaint system of four different Air Force bases (Holloman, Luke, Davis-Monthan, and Tucson Air National Guard) and forwarding information to the military affairs advisors of our congressional delegation, not one low-level F-16 flight was identified by the Air Force out of the half dozen reported by the public.

This inability to trace the base of origin concerned local citizens as they began considering the potential impacts of a new MOA over the Gila. Questions were raised as to the likelihood of accountability for future violations or possible accidental wildfires from flares, since it was proving impossible to find anyone to take responsibility or even respond to requests for information. In response to these concerns, a group of concerned citizens created a central, online complaint system that utilized the format of the Air Force public affairs submission form. Individual emails were sent to each base with a copy of the flight complaint information.



Since April 2018, the start date for data collection on citizen complaints, there have been twenty-nine reported incidences of low-flying (below 2,000 feet) and/or nuisance military flyovers in the Gila region. Most of the complaints involved extreme noise and in some cases, extremely low-flying jets. Only one individual reported receiving a response from the Air Force regarding a complaint.

Throughout the area that could be impacted by an additional MOA over the Gila region, there is considerable concern about the level of accountability that exists currently for determining the sources of problem military flyovers. There is reasonable skepticism that the Air Force or Air National Guard will improve their accountability or reliability in responding to these complaints.

**On the next three pages are nine examples of the 29 complaints submitted in 2018.**



Type of Complaint: low-level flight  
Date of Incident: 10/20/2018  
Time of Incident: approximately 2:30-3pm  
Weather Conditions: fair  
Number of aircraft: 2  
Description of aircraft: two red and white fighter jets  
Direction Heading: headed north to south over ridge, turning south over the Gila River  
Approximate Altitude: low - maybe 250 feet  
Location of Incident: over 3796 NM-15, Silver City, NM 88061  
Description of Incident: horses startled; pilots could see clearly they were over a village

Type of Complaint: low-level flight  
Date of Incident: 10/27/2018  
Time of Incident: 1:10 PM  
Weather Conditions: clear  
Number of aircraft: 1  
Description of aircraft: C-5  
Direction Heading: northerly  
Approximate Altitude: less than 2,000 feet above ground level (AGL)  
Location of Incident: southwest edge of Gila National Forest  
Description of Incident: very disturbing to have such a large, low-flying aircraft making so much noise.

Type of Complaint: unusual activity  
Date of Incident: 08/14/2018  
Time of Incident: 1:12 PM  
Weather Conditions: clear  
Number of aircraft: 1  
Description of aircraft: looked just like the one on top on the right above  
Direction Heading: mostly west, slightly south  
Approximate Altitude: 500 feet  
Location of Incident: brushy mountain road and radar station road  
Description of Incident: extremely loud and fast and low.

Type of Complaint: Other  
Date of Incident: 09/12/2018  
Time of Incident: 1:00 PM  
Weather Conditions: Clear  
Number of aircraft involved: 1  
Description of aircraft: F-16  
Direction Heading: east  
Approximate Altitude: 500 feet  
Location of Incident: off State Highway 90 at the Continental Divide Trailhead. Going south from Silver City, first intersection between the CDT and Hwy 90 in the Gila Forest  
Description of Incident: quiet and peaceful enjoyment of GNF interrupted by very loud roar directly overhead. I looked up and saw the underside of the fighter jet. I estimate it was going 500 MPH at 500 feet above me. Unmistakable!

Type of Complaint: unusual activity  
Date of Incident: 07/13/2018  
Time of Incident: 10:22, 11:40, 12:27  
Weather Conditions: mostly sunny, some clouds  
Number of aircraft: 3 - first one at 10:22 and another at 11:40, another at 12:27  
Description of aircraft: first one not visible; second one silver grey military jet, large with a white large bump on top, third one .  
Direction Heading: first one not discernable  
Approximate Altitude: first one unknown; second one 500 feet; third one unknown  
Location of Incident: brushy mountain road (route 112) and radar station road  
Description of Incident: none - we would say all three are military by how loud and how fast they seem to be moving, the one at 500 feet which we could see was most definitely military

Type of Complaint: low level  
Date of Incident: 08/23/2018  
Time of Incident: 11:30  
Weather Conditions: overcast  
Number of aircraft: 1  
Description of aircraft: C-130  
Direction Heading: circling  
Approximate Altitude: 300-500 feet over hills  
Location of Incident: Mule Creek  
Description of Incident: loud cracking sound, continuous circling for 1/2 hour plus

Type of Complaint: low level  
Date of Incident: 06/17/2018  
Time of Incident: 4:15 pm  
Weather Conditions: clear  
Number of aircraft: 4  
Description of aircraft: four large, brown helicopters  
Direction Heading: toward Silver City, i.e. east  
Approximate Altitude: 500 feet  
Location of Incident: Flying A Ranch, off Red Rock Rd.  
Description of Incident: each helicopter had lights on it. They looked like military or military or Government helicopters.

Type of Complaint: low level  
Date of Incident: 04/17/2018  
Time of Incident: approximately, 11:30 AM, MDT  
Weather Conditions: fair  
Number of aircraft: 2 aircraft, same type.  
Description of aircraft: jet, possibly an F-16  
Direction Heading: from west, going east  
Approximate Altitude: 2 aircraft, same type, one at a distinctly higher altitude.  
Location of Incident: US 70 between Duncan, AZ and Lordsburg, NM  
Description of Incident: no property damage. "The punk buzzed me - very low and directly above - in my moving vehicle, while the other jet flew above and away from me."

Type of Complaint: low level  
Date of Incident: 04/11/2018  
Time of Incident: 4:20pm  
Weather Conditions: cloudy  
Number of aircraft: 5  
Description of aircraft: three Osprey, and two support aircraft  
Approximate Altitude: less than 1,000 feet  
Location of Incident: three miles south of the Gila Cliff Dwellings near Doc Campbell's store on State Route 15, New Mexico  
Description of Incident: rumbling and shaking of the house - seemed like an earthquake

Type of Complaint: low level  
Date of Incident: 03/06/2018  
Time of Incident: 11:50  
Weather Conditions: cloudy  
Number of aircraft: 1  
Description of aircraft: F-16  
Direction Heading: north to south  
Approximate Altitude: about 1500 feet  
Location of Incident: Gila Hot Springs village on Route 15  
Description of Incident: low level, very loud

So, citizens have made complaints about flying operations in their areas -- and all the bases have an office for civilian complaints -- but there is usually no response from the Air Force or Air National Guard. Unfortunately, citizen reports of these flight violations most often go unanswered, or the answer is merely, "*Not one of ours.*"

### 3. Concerns Regarding Future Accountability

It seems reasonable to assume that if a new MOA is established over the Gila region, with training of as many as 10,000 sorties per year, the number of complaints and problem flyovers will exponentially increase in the region. Citizens are extremely concerned about the cumulative impact of extreme noise, low-flying aircraft, and overflights over sensitive areas of the Gila region and are equally concerned about the virtually 0% accountability thus far in determining sources of problem overflights and are requesting that the Air Force consider the impact of these issues in their analysis. The clear lack of accountability and non-responses to complaints are disheartening to people under the MOA and MTR flight paths, whether they are residents, hunters, hikers or others in areas, such as the Gila National Forest and nearby wilderness areas.

During the formal planning process for Holloman to optimize its Special Use Airspace (SUA), the impacts of aircraft training in the SUA will be analyzed according to the type of aircraft, the number of sorties, and the flight profiles—how high, how fast, are extreme maneuvers involved. In the end, however, if those aircraft fly at lower altitudes than the analyses addressed or outside the approved flight corridors or profiles, then the experience of people on the ground, beneath the aircraft, will be substantially different and much worse than what was anticipated and authorized. What, then, is the benefit of the analyses?

**Before the Air Force authorizes the establishment or expansion of additional MOAs over important public lands, including significant pristine areas and over any private lands, it needs to ensure the enforcement of flight rules that protect the public and develop a robust accountability process to address citizens' concerns.**