

# The Gila is not appropriate for flyovers

By U.S. Senator Martin Heinrich | Silver City Daily Press  
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I am calling on the Air Force not to expand airspace over the Gila and surrounding areas. Especially when there are other more appropriate overflight options, it makes no sense to threaten what makes the Gila so special and unnecessarily create hostility between the public and the military in New Mexico.

Nearly 100 years ago, a forester named Aldo Leopold recognized the beauty and irreplaceable value of an untrammled area of mountains, rivers, and mesas in southwestern New Mexico. As lands across the West were being broken up by development, roads, and railroads, Leopold proposed that the headwaters of the Gila River should be preserved as the nation's first road-less, unimpeded wilderness. Today, so many of us are grateful for Leopold's foresight.

Some of my best memories are the camping trips I've been able to take with my wife, Julie, and our two sons in wild places like the Gila Wilderness. I have always been drawn to places like the Gila-landscapes where you can get away from the cell phones, computers and everything else that tends to clutter the mind. Backpacking trips into places like McKenna Park and Turkey Feather Pass, the Jerky Mountains and the Gila River canyon have given me the time and space to grow closer to my family and friends and reflect.

From the outset, local residents have expressed steady and firm opposition to the Air Force's proposal for the Gila and have made it abundantly clear that low-level flights and flares in wilderness areas would be disruptive to their way of life, threaten public safety and damage the local economy.

The outdoor recreation opportunities in the Gila are integral to the quality of life and economy of Grant and Catron Counties. Visitors from around the world are drawn to the region's hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, and peaceful wilderness. Many local residents- from retirees to young entrepreneurs-choose to live in the area because of its unrivaled natural surroundings.

The military would also lose more than it would gain from the proposal. New Mexico already has in place a number of airspace agreements for military aircraft training locations, also known as Military Operation Areas, which have been based on positive and mutually beneficial relationships between the military and the public for over 30 years. Reshaping and expanding the existing airspace agreement over the Gila risks jeopardizing the appropriate balance that has been in place for decades.

Throughout the airspace evaluation, I have urged the Air Force to coordinate with local stakeholders and to address community concerns. If the Air Force listens to those who know New Mexico best, I am confident they will reach the same conclusion I have: that an expansion of airspace over the Gila would be a mistake, and that optimizing airspace

elsewhere would enable the Air Force to better train its pilots and ensure the positive relationship with the military in New Mexico endures.

This is about striking the right balance. New Mexico has maintained a good working relationship between the military and the surrounding communities for years by listening to community concerns and making smart decisions. Today, that means recognizing that overflights through the Gila are not the right approach.