

US Air Force Releases Plan for Low Elevation Supersonic Flights and Low Altitude Air Combat Training Over SE Arizona and SW New Mexico

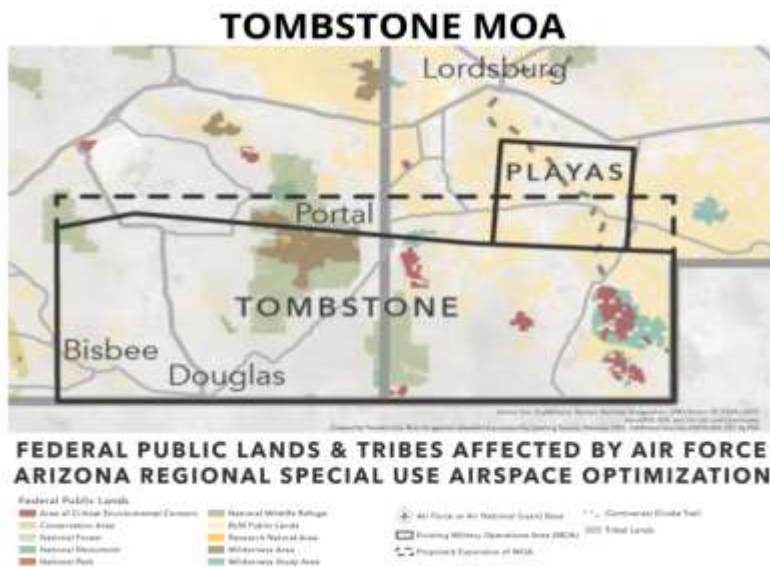
The United States Air Force is proposing to modify ten existing Military Operations Areas (MOAs) that stretch across southern Arizona and southwest New Mexico as part of their Special Use Optimization Strategy to expand low elevation combat training. This includes the Tombstone MOA that covers New Mexico's southern mountains and playas, all the way to Bisbee, AZ to the west. The MOAs serve Luke Air Force Base in Phoenix, and the Morris Air National Guard Base and Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson. The plan expands the size of the Tombstone MOA, establishes a 100 foot above ground level (AGL) flight floor for fighter jet maneuvers, authorizes thousands of additional low altitude combat training flights, including supersonic, and dramatically increases the number of flares and chaff released over millions of acres of federal public lands. These modifications will impact numerous rural communities along with significant portions of the Coronado National Forest, the Continental Divide Trail, multiple national wildlife refuges, the entire Chiricahua Wilderness Area, and portions of the Chiricahua National Monument.

The proposal to expand the size and use of the Tombstone MOA, amounts to an attempt to turn an enormous swath SE Arizona and SW New Mexico into a low elevation military training ground without regard for ecological, economic, social, and cultural impacts. **Despite the significant changes to the use of the Tombstone MOA, no public hearings were held or are being planned in Portal, Bisbee, Douglas, or any newly affected communities in SE Arizona, despite repeated requests.**

OCTOBER 9TH DEADLINE TO SUBMIT COMMENTS on the DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

[Comment Form Online](https://www.arizonaregionalairspaceeis.com/comments/)

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***Tell the Air Force that expanding military combat training over rural communities and tribal and public lands is not acceptable.**

***The Air Force should restrict its lower elevation and supersonic flights, and other combat training, such as dropping chaff and flares, to the Barry M Goldwater Range where it's already happening.**

***The Air Force must not shift the burden of risk to rural and tribal communities in southern AZ and southwest NM.**

For more information contact Peaceful Gila Skies

www.peacefulgilaskies.com * 575-538-8078 * peacefulgilaskies@gmail.com

Summary of proposed changes to air combat training in the Tombstone MOA & suggested comments

Proposed: The overall size of the Tombstone MOA is enlarged by nearly one third and encloses the town of Portal and the world-renowned birding area of Cave Creek, AZ, within a low-altitude combat training area. The proposal lowers the flight floor for subsonic training sorties to 100' AGL. The proposal also lowers the level of supersonic flight to 5,000 feet (AGL).

Comment: *By creating a low altitude combat training ground across two states, dozens of sensitive resource areas, and multiple towns and cities that depend on tourism as the basis of their economy, the DEIS fails to acknowledge or analyze the resulting negative impacts on the socio-economic fabric of these communities.*

Comment: *The DEIS acknowledges that lowering the flight floor of supersonic jet flight to 5,000 ft (AGL) will increase the sonic boom pressure five-fold. But the flawed analysis concludes there will be no increase in negative impacts, despite the increasing evidence nationwide of broken car windshields, cracked foundations and dozens of recorded evidence of damaged houses. The Air Force should restrict low level supersonic flight to existing training grounds, such as the Barry M Goldwater Range, which is more suited for that level of risk.*

Proposed: The number of combat training flights (sorties) permitted in the Tombstone MOA is increased up to 131% for a total of 8,000 sorties annually.

Comment: *More than doubling the military training activity above these communities will negatively impact wildlife, domestic animals, real estate values and create conflicts with existing land use such as traditional ranching and farming, degrading the quality of life. These social, cultural and economic impacts have not been properly measured or analyzed by the existing DEIS, thereby minimizing the risks and negative consequences.*

Proposed: New for Tombstone, the release of chaff (aluminum coated silica fibers used in evasive maneuvers) will be authorized and up to 7,000 bundles permitted annually. The minimum release altitude of burning flare cartridges has been lowered from 5,000 feet AGL to 2,000 feet AGL and **the number of number of flares allowed has increased up to 85% for a total of 30,000 annually.**

Comment: *The Tombstone MOA, one of the smallest of the 10, is being positioned to receive the most significant increase of chaff and flare use, and consequently, an environment most heavily polluted by the dispersal of chaff fibers in an area heavily used recreationally. The dramatic rise in the number of flares increases the risk of wildfire in areas already vulnerable to wildfire and with limited resources for firefighting. The DEIS fails to acknowledge any increased risk of fire and uses 30-year-old data to analyze the likelihood of fires from flares or crashes and places the burden for the initial emergency response on local resources.*

Additional Comments

Lack of meetings within communities affected delegitimizes the DEIS process, disenfranchising the people who are impacted most by the proposed changes. Offering virtual meetings as an alternative has been shown to be considerably less effective at engaging rural communities. Complaints about current fighter jet incursions into unauthorized airspace above the town of Portal have gone unanswered by the Air Force bases in Tucson.

The DEIS fails to offer a compelling reason why expanding low altitude combat training and lowering supersonic flight levels is warranted. Using the Barry M Goldwater Range (BMGR) is a safer choice given they are better prepared for accidents and emergencies than rural and tribal communities.