

Air Force flights, fights and 2011 Legislature

My Turn

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“Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed.”

— *Wallace Stegner*

In September 2010, after years of planning by state and federal agencies and elected officials, the public was finally told that 94,000 square miles of Northern New Mexico and southern Colorado would soon to be turned into a very low-altitude training range for the Air Force, as low as 200 feet.

This huge expanse — home of the headwaters of most of the rivers of New Mexico — was about to become a Low Altitude Tactical Navigation (LATN) training range.

An immediate uproar ensued, both for and against this massive takings. Towns, counties and tribal governments immediately took action, passing strong resolutions in opposition to the LATN initiative. Other governmental entities passed resolutions in favor of the LATN. Patriotism and support or non-support of the military became the issue.

The politics of divide and conquer were firmly in place.

The discussion must turn to learning more about what is actually being planned and what the impacts of this LATN might be on our communities; the wildlife, livestock, environment, water, cultures, and human public health. Although the Air Force has told us that our terrain is special and exactly what they need for practice, it turns out there are numerous other huge air space expansions in the works, a number of them also for low altitude training.

In fact at an October 2010 EIS scoping meeting in Wyoming, the Air Force showed a map of the proposed expansion super-imposed over a map of Afghanistan to show that the Powder River area was perfect as a practice zone for the current and future wars in southwest Asia. The Air Force told New Mexicans the exact same thing. How much of the U.S. is to be sacrificed to the endless practice for more war?

The Peaceful Skies Coalition of Northern New Mexico and Colorado is asking the Legislature to request that the Air Force conduct an Environmental Impact Statement.

Rep. Roberto “Bobby” Gonzales has introduced House Joint Memorial 47 and Sen. John Pinto has introduced Senate Joint Memorial 34. A memorial has two parts; “whereas” statements explaining the reasons and need for the Memorial and it then ends with statements of “resolve” which identify the action requested by the Legislature.

We advocates would like to clarify that nearly all the statements of concern in the Memorial have been officially passed in one or more of the numerous local government resolutions in opposition to the LATN. Each concern, or “whereas,” reflects the desire of local governments to protect their communities and also to reflect the will of the people they represent.

These local government statements were woven together in the Memorial as the basis for asking the Legislature to help assure that the federal National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) is followed before this major change to Northern New Mexico and Colorado can begin.

Supporters of HJM 47 and SJM 34 have already been told by one legislator that he did not like the statements of the local governments that were included in the memorial. We may hear this from others as the memorials wend through the House and Senate committees. However, we believe that it is important to have the statements of local governments included. The Legislature is not being asked to oppose the LATN, it is being asked only to request that an EIS be completed.

We need a full environmental impact statement to learn exactly what is planned, the potential risks, if any, and how the Air Force will mitigate and compensate any losses from this very large federal sky grab.

The Air Force said this terrain was essential, the only place available for the type of war practice they need. We now know that is not true. They tried to use the patriotism of New Mexicans to divide us.

This strategy is not acceptable, we are coming together to say, slow down and let us learn together what the Air Force has planned for our future.

“As we peer into society’s future, we — you and I, and our government — must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering for our own ease and convenience, the precious resources of tomorrow.” — President Eisenhower’s Farewell speech, 1961 Carol Miller is a resident of Ojo Sarco.