



New Mexico Wilderness Alliance

Fall 2017 Advisory Newsletter

We need your help today to stop a proposal that would jeopardize all of our work in the greater Gila area and destroy the wild qualities of the world's first Wilderness.

New Mexico Wild has been working strong for years in and around the Gila Wilderness to bolster the Mexican gray wolf recovery effort; to prevent a massive diversion project of one of the Southwest's last free-flowing rivers; to permanently protect the Gila River through federal Wild and Scenic River designation; and fighting for additional administrative and legislative protections of one million acres of currently unprotected roadless areas adjacent to the Gila and Aldo Leopold Wilderness Areas.

The THREAT

We recently learned that Holloman Air Force Base (AFB) is planning military training exercises in the area on a scale that would devastate the peace, quiet and solitude that make our state's largest and oldest Wilderness Area so special. We discovered that they plan to conduct 10,000 sorties annually above the Gila and Aldo Leopold Wilderness Areas. Yes, you read that right: an average of almost 30 flights each day. We understand that these "overflights" will be low altitude jets screaming only 500 feet above the National Forest and 2,000 feet above Wilderness. What's more, they propose to drop 30,000 magnesium flares each year and "defensive chaff" while doing so. **Their proposal would mean that all of the wilderness areas, wilderness study areas and the entire Gila National Forest would look and sound like a war zone.**

The U.S. Air Force is obligated to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, which requires public involvement. They are preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to assess the potential environmental effects of "optimizing the training airspace at Holloman AFB". They have not fulfilled that obligation.

Holloman AFB did not notify us of this proposal, nor did they inform the Grant or Catron County Commissions. They didn't bother to have a public meeting in Silver City, the population center closest to their proposed activities. In fact, the public scoping period had already closed by the time we discovered what they were trying to do. Had it not been for a vigilant supporter bringing this to our attention, this preposterous plan might have gone unchallenged.



F-15E Strike Eagles launch chaff and flares.
Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

WHAT WE ARE DOING ABOUT IT

We immediately drafted a letter to Holloman AFB, asking that the scoping period be reopened and extended and that they hold a public meeting in Silver City to explain to concerned citizens what exactly they are proposing, why it is necessary, and why they think Wilderness is an appropriate place for supersonic jets and incendiary devices.

We got the word out to partner organizations and businesses affected and within 48 hours secured endorsements from dozens of groups. We also reached out to other groups that are typically hostile to our efforts. We think there is common cause on this issue.

We immediately contacted our congressional delegation to bring this to their attention and to request their assistance scheduling a meeting with Holloman officials.

NEW MEXICO WILD IS DEMANDING ANSWERS

Has Holloman seriously investigated Department of Defense lands to assess if the objectives of their training mission can be accomplished somewhere more appropriate?

- What would be the implications of this to wildlife?
- How would this disruption impact local businesses such as outdoor retailers and outfitters?
- What about the effect on local governments and economies that depend on recreationists, hunters, and tourists?
- What is the fire risk associated with spraying 30,000 magnesium flares over the forest each year? How will they impact the Gila's dark night skies?
- What are the environmental consequences to human health, wildlife, water and the land from chromium- and lead-filled chaff?
- Where is the wisdom in dropping incendiary devices over an arid, mountainous, roadless forest?

We know of other examples where the military has proposed training exercises, but when confronted with overwhelming public opposition they have backed

down. With your voice, and those of others who care about our wilderness areas, we will work to stop these deafening, low-altitude overflights and keep the peace in our wildlands.

We are by no means anti-military, and we're proud to have so many veterans as members and supporters. Indeed, veteran's groups have been strong allies of ours in the battle for public lands, including in both the Rio Grande del Norte and Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks national monument campaigns (and now the efforts to save them). Vets know that the peace and space and beauty of protected public lands offers solace and healing for many returning combat veterans. How ironic and devastating it would be to take this away from them. **No, we think protecting America's first wilderness is patriotic and that there are other areas more appropriate for the military to conduct training exercises.**

The Gila is a special place for many reasons. It was here where the wilderness ethic was formed. It was deemed special enough to receive the first administrative wilderness designation ever given, in 1924. It is New Mexico's largest and wildest place. It also still contains the most potential for additional wilderness protections in the state.

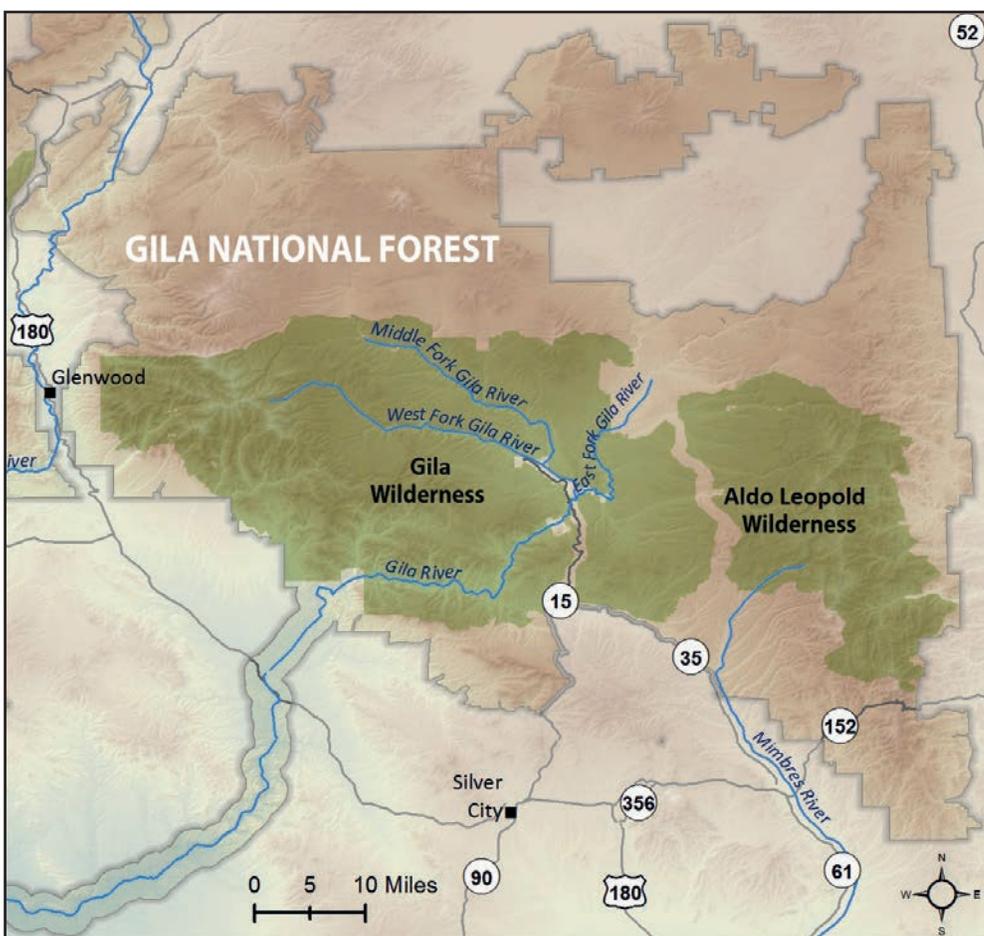
The threats to our wild places and public lands in this hostile political environment are many and its already "all hands on deck." But the historical importance of the Gila and the enormity of this threat absolutely require we do everything in our power to prevent this proposal from being realized.

We are asking for your help. We need people to sign a petition registering their opposition to this proposal at <http://bit.ly/Overflights>. We will need you to show up to public meetings to make your voice heard.

We also need your financial contribution to help us keep the fight going. Please use the enclosed reply form to make a special donation.

You can also donate securely online at: www.nmwild.org/overflights

Add your donation to others who care about protecting America's first wilderness. Help us defend the Gila from this attack.



The proposed overflights would impact the Gila National Forest, including the Gila Wilderness and Aldo Leopold Wilderness.