

Air Force training could disrupt Owyhee's 'Big Quiet'

By JORDAN RANE
Columbia Insight

ONTARIO — One of the country's most sparsely populated and persistently defended high desert wild lands soon may be subject to frequent sonic booms and shrieking fighter jets.

The Mountain Home Air Force Base in southwestern Idaho is proposing expanded military training allowances across large portions of the Owyhee Desert — a 9-million-acre landscape of shrub steppe and remote canyons spanning three states cherished by tribes, ranchers, sportsmen, paddlers, hikers, conservationists, scientists and stargazers.

The air base's Proposal for Airspace Optimization for Readiness would increase the frequency and low-flight intensity of jet fighter exercises across giant sections of southwestern Idaho, northern Nevada and southeastern Oregon.

Current airspace restrictions in the latter two states within the established USAF training range are set above at least 10,000 feet — or 30,000 feet when breaking the sound barrier.

"In many cases that's barely noticeable — you might see those planes before you hear them — but it's nothing like what's being proposed in the current plan," says Mark Salvo, conservation director at Oregon Natural Desert Association. "We're deeply concerned about fighter jet noise and disturbance to wild lands, wild waters, sensitive wildlife and local communities, the risk of wildfire from the increased use of flammable flares — and the fact that the Air Force hasn't explained why it needs to conduct more and more intense training across this huge tri-state area."

'Gunfighters' legacy

Mountain Home Air Force Base is home to the 366th Fighter Wing (nicknamed the "Gunfighters") and the F-15E Strike Eagle, a dual-role fighter designed to perform air-to-air and air-to-ground missions. An array of avionics and elec-



Jim Davis/Contributed Photo

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tronics systems gives the F-15E the capability to fight at low altitude, day or night, in all weather.

The 366th Fighter Wing's primary mission is to provide combat airpower and support, as well as quick response to the military's worldwide contingency operations.

The base also is used for training by the Singapore Air Force, which has a detachment of F-15SG fighters on long-term assignment there.

This isn't the first time the USAF has proposed expanding training in the Owyhee Desert from its Mountain Home Air Force Base.

Seeking live bombing, missile shooting and low-flying exercises in the area in 1989, the Air Force expected minimal opposition in one of the country's most remote and lightly

populated areas.

This turned out to be a miscalculation.

Opposition from Idaho-based groups led to nearly a decade of litigation and a compromise that ultimately allowed restricted low-altitude jet fighter training in Idaho's Owyhee County.

Public comment deadline Oct. 25

In Oregon, the USAF's proposal could increase the frequency of sonic boom-producing training flights to nearly 19 per day — shattering the area's famed Canyonlands, nicknamed "The Big Quiet," and distressing indigenous wildlife.

ONDA has launched a new online story map online story map of the area.

Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden



U.S. Air Force/Contributed Photo

The 366th Fighter Wing of the U.S. Air Force flies out of Mountain Home Air Force Base in southwestern Idaho. The Air Force seeks fewer restrictions for the group, which would impact the portion of the Owyhee Desert in southeastern Oregon.

and Jeff Merkley, Democrats, have proposed protecting more than a million acres of wilderness in the Owyhee Canyonlands, and designating 33 miles of Wild and Scenic Rivers precisely where the military has proposed more intensive training.

The military's plan also would impact more than 500,000 combined acres of Wilderness Study Areas and Bureau of Land Management lands, according to ONDA.

Much of the Owyhee Desert's sprawling shrub steppe and canyons are on public land.

"The Air Force needs to hear that there is strong, broad support for conservation in the Owyhee Canyonlands and southeastern Oregon, and that their proposal threatens to undermine the qualities that make this region so exceptional," according to an ONDA web posting.

The deadline for public comment on the Air Force's proposal was extended to Monday, Oct. 25. The Air Force is required to provide a final environmental impact statement by a date that remains pending. A draft version of the EIS can be found here.

You can submit a comment directly to the USAF here or copy an ONDA letter and submit a comment at www.mountainhomeafbairspaceis.com.

"Given the breadth and depth of public comment provided on the draft plan," Salvo said, "we suspect it will take many months just to incorporate that (public) input."

Oregon wants test-to-stay in school policy

By ELIZABETH MILLER
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — Schools have opened, and stayed open, this fall, even with COVID-19 still sickening people in Oregon communities. But COVID-19 is affecting schools too, including students and staff who don't have the virus, as close contacts and exposures to positive cases lead to quarantines, which move people in and out of school.

Oregon Department of Education director Colt Gill sees two solutions to that.

"One is more students getting vaccinated," Gill said.

Currently, students 12 and older are eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine. Vaccine eligibility for students ages 5-11 may be coming soon, but the FDA has not been approved that yet.

Students who are vaccinated and asymptomatic can remain in school.

The other solution, Gill said, is something called "test-to-stay." This program means students who test negative for COVID-19 can stay in school. Oregon health officials said last month they were considering it, but at an Oregon state board of education meeting Thursday, Oct. 21, Gill said Oregon needs to make it happen — starting with a more uniform quarantine policy across counties.

"I'm working with the Oregon Health Authority to try to streamline that, and to frankly move to a test-to-stay policy, where students and staff are regularly tested for COVID-19 if they become a close contact and can stay in school if those tests are negative," Gill said.

"Test-to-stay" is different from current testing efforts schools may be offering. A large number of schools offer diagnostic testing for students and staffing who are showing COVID-19 symptoms. A smaller number of schools have signed on to offer screening testing, which gives schools a broader sense of the presence of COVID-19 by testing students and staff who don't have symptoms. That program is voluntary for schools and families.

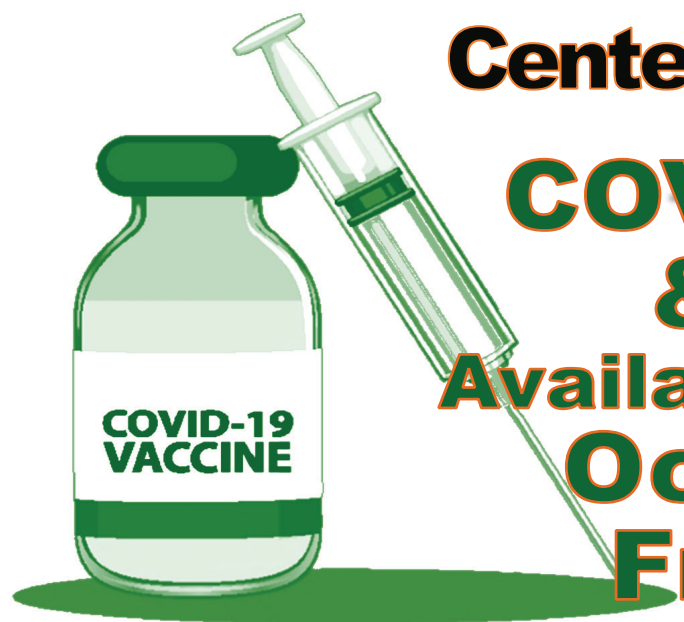
Test-to-stay faces capacity problem

But both ODE and OHA said there's something holding Oregon back from "test-to-stay" — a stockpile of rapid testing kits, which they say Oregon doesn't have.

"We are working hard to notify the federal government that we need more access to those kits, we know that they are working on access to those kits, and as soon as they're available in Oregon, that's what we will be moving towards," Gill said.

Officials with the Oregon Health Authority also say there's a staffing issue with implementing test-to-stay.

DRIVETHRU VACCINATION EVENT at the Pendleton Convention Center Parking Lot



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& Flu Vaccine
Available Friday & Saturday
October 29 & 30
From 9am-1pm**

**Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson
BOOSTERS NOW AVAILABLE
Dose Information**

**Boosters, 1 Dose
Pfizer: 12 years +, 2 Doses
Moderna: 18 years +, 2 Doses
Johnson & Johnson: 18 years+, 1 Dose
No Appointments Needed**



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