

Department of the Air Force Testimony

To the Subcommittee on Federal Lands, Committee on Natural Resources, U.S. House of Representatives

Statement of the Honorable Ravi I. Chaudhary, Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Energy, Installations and Environment

Hearing on July 13, 2023

Regarding H.R. 4377 – To amend the Military Lands Withdrawal Act of 1999 with respect to extensions, additions, and revisions to the Barry M. Goldwater Range in Arizona.

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and esteemed members of this subcommittee, thank you for conducting this hearing to discuss H.R. 4377 – a vital bill to amend the Military Lands Withdrawal Act of 1999 to extend the withdrawal and revision for the Barry M. Goldwater Range. If not enacted, the current land withdrawal will expire in October 2024 and the Department of Defense will lose access to a vitally important range.

The Department of the Air Force and the Department of the Navy wholeheartedly support Representative Grijalva’s efforts regarding the Barry M. Goldwater Range, or BMGR. If the current withdrawal expires, both departments will lose access to a vital training range that is essential to our nation’s defense.

The BMGR is in southwestern Arizona. Since 1941, the BGMR has served as a military training range, originally used to train pilots and aircrew for combat in World War II. Eighty years later, the BMGR is one of the nation’s most capable and productive training ranges and remains indispensable to the ability of the U.S. Armed Forces to produce the combat-ready aircrews needed to defend the nation and its interests.

The BMGR is the nation’s fourth largest land-based range and the largest at which tactical aviation training is the predominant mission. It provides critical training capability for the U.S. Air Force, United State Marine Corps, and the U.S. Navy. Users of BMGR East include the largest F-35 training wing in the Air Force, from Luke Air Force Base, F-16s from the Tucson Air National Guard base, and A-10s and Special Operations units from Davis-Monthan Air Force Base. Users of BMGR West include Marine pilots and Naval flight officers in F/A-18 Hornets, AV-8B Harriers, and F-35Bs from Marine Corps Air Station Yuma.

Although aircrew training is the predominant mission of the BMGR, the range is also vital for preparing personnel and units performing a wide range of missions relevant to current and future threats to our nation. It is routinely used for operational testing activities (also referred to as operational test and evaluation). Some of the military training and testing activities involve the use of live-fire air-to-air, air-to-ground, ground-to-ground, and ground-to-air munitions. The BMGR provides realistic training so that our servicemembers can train to meet both current and future threats.

The BMGR encompasses approximately 1.6 million acres of federal public land withdrawn from public use and reserved for military training and testing. Although the BMGR has been in operation since it was established in 1941, withdrawal of the range is not permanent and requires periodic extensions through congressional action. The Military Lands Withdrawal Act of 1999 withdrew the federal public land as one military range but reserved the eastern and western portions of the range for separate use by the Secretaries of the Air Force and Navy, respectively. It is used as an area for armament and high-hazard testing; aerial gunnery, rocketry, electronic warfare training; tactical maneuvering and air support; equipment and tactics development testing and training; and for other defense related purposes. The Military Lands Withdrawal Act of 1999 extended the BMGR withdrawal for 25 years and without Congressional action, the withdrawal will expire on October 4, 2024.

The Departments of the Air Force and Navy enthusiastically support H.R. 4377, which would extend the BMGR land withdrawal for 25-years. This bill would not change underlying federal agency jurisdiction or enact a 50-year or permanent withdrawal, which were alternatives analyzed in the September 2021 Legislative Environmental Impact Statement (LEIS). Public comments received during the LEIS process were overwhelmingly supportive of the 25-year renewal of the withdrawal.

This bill also requests a small addition to the withdrawal comprising approximately 2,366 acres or an increase of roughly 0.14 percent. The additional land is adjacent to the Gila Bend Air Force Auxiliary Field (AFAF). The Gila Bend Auxiliary Field is a unique support asset integral to the daily operation of the range. It is used for practice touch-and-go landings, simulated flameout patterns, precautionary flameout patterns, and as an emergency divert field. The Gila Bend AFAF provides the facilities required to support maintenance and operations for both the airfield and BMGR-East. Given its austere nature and proximity to the range, the field is routinely used as a forward operating base. It is quickly becoming a preferred training location. The additional land would enhance security and safety of flight operations by allowing the DAF to establish a complete security perimeter adjacent to the airfield. The additional land would also provide control of land that is within Accident Potential Zone-1 for Runway 17/35, which would remove the potential for incompatible activities or land uses to occur on that land. The additional land would also allow the Department of the Air Force to control the use and access to land under restricted airspace (R-2305) so that surface activities in these parcels remain compatible with the training operations in the overlying airspace, which extends from the ground surface to 24,000 feet above mean sea level.

The Department of the Air Force appreciates the professional and productive working relationship with the Department of Interior on this legislation. In preparing this legislation, the Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps worked extensively with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Through its land withdrawal review processes, BLM identified needed corrections to land status records, including the revocation of historic Public Land Orders and Executive Orders from the World War II era. BLM also identified a need to clarify the Military Lands Withdrawal Act of 1986 regarding lands identified for relinquishment. This bill corrects these land status anomalies and helps clarify the current land status so that federal record keeping is accurate for posterity. Finally, at the recommendation of BLM, and in consultation with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, language in this bill would transfer to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

approximately 21 acres of land, which would be included in the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge and the Cabeza Prieta Wilderness.

In summary, without an extension, the BMGR land withdrawal will expire on October 4, 2024, resulting in the cessation of critical training and testing activities on the range conducted by the Departments of the Air Force and Navy. This would directly impact our ability to train and test against peer adversaries as directed in the National Defense Strategy. I respectfully request your support of H.R. 4377 and look forward to your questions.