

STATEMENT OF
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(ENERGY, INSTALLATIONS AND ENVIRONMENT)

before the

SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS
AND ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATION

of the

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

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Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, and members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss the “Naval Air Weapons Station China Lake Security Enhancement Act” (HR 4458), sponsored by Representative McCarthy, House Majority Whip. Thanks in large part to the support of this Committee, the Fiscal Year 2014 National Defense Authorization Act extended the withdrawal and reservation of public lands supporting the operations of Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake until 2039. HR4458 would make that military land withdrawal permanent. In addition, HR4458 would add approximately 26,349 acres to Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake.

Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake is our premier research, development, acquisition, testing and evaluation (RDAT&E) laboratory and range. China Lake supports the development of cutting-edge weapons systems for the warfighter. The installation supports approximately 10,000 hours of aircraft and weapons testing and evaluation annually as well as over 20,000 annual training sorties in the R2508 Airspace Complex that is critical in maintaining national military readiness. The only place where the Department can perform such testing, training and operations is at China Lake. Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake currently consists of over 1 million acres of land of which 92% are withdrawn public lands. The Department’s long-term plans for use of China Lake extend decades into the future and there is no reasonably foreseeable alternative location where the Navy can conduct the same testing, training, and operational missions. HR4458 would increase the total size of Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake to approximately 1,071,349 acres, a 2.5% increase.

The Department of the Navy is not prepared to support a permanent withdrawal for Naval Air Weapons Station (NAWS), China Lake, without careful consideration of the supporting legislative provisions. While we believe the current system of periodic legislative re-withdrawals is not particularly efficient, without a more detailed review, we do not know if we are in a position to assume all of the land management functions that would accompany a permanent withdrawal. In addition, some of the lands in question may be used in a manner that may not be consistent with a transfer of administrative jurisdiction.

With respect to the 26,349 acres that HR4458 would add to Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake, our current footprint meets all of our current needs. The Department of the Navy would, of course, be good stewards of any land that Congress assigns to the Navy, and will work cooperatively with the Department of Interior regarding this proposal to withdraw additional lands; however even considering future needs, we do not have compelling requirement or justification for acquiring ALL of these additional lands.

The 26,349 acres described in HR4458 lie underneath FAA designated restricted airspace controlled by NAWS, China Lake. This acreage falls into three categories: 1) the former Cuddeback Lake Air Force Range, 2) the property surrounding the former range, and 3) the area north of the Grass Valley Wilderness Area. I will address each of these categories.

The first category is the former Cuddeback Lake Air Force Range, which is approximately 7,546 acres, and the connecting parcels. It was used by the Air Force from the early 1960s to 1983 for test piloting, aerial gunnery, bombing and strafing. That training has since shifted to the Navy's Superior Valley Range at Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake. The Cuddeback Range was withdrawn for defense purposes by Public Law 88-46 in 1963 and expired in 1978. Because this property has been well-used as far back as the 1940s, Cuddeback Range would be a logical extension of China Lake for expanding and evolving RDAT&E capabilities. This area is already disturbed and would not be suitable for incorporation into any of the adjacent Wilderness areas. It is very suitable, however, for supporting China Lake's evolving mission as an RDAT&E range. Thus, we believe that Cuddeback Range is the perfect area for anticipated future RDAT&E requirements, such as the testing of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles and other unmanned systems. The Cuddeback Range is rectangular in shape and lies approximately one mile south of the South Range of Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake. If the Cuddeback Range was connected to the South Range of China Lake, it would allow for a more efficient use and management of the range by eliminating the "island effect." This connection between the two ranges could be made by adding the two sections of land (1,280 acres) just north of Cuddeback Range that abut China Lake.

The second category is the public land west and south of Cuddeback Range. This area is approximately 3,000 acres. It is within FAA designated restricted airspace controlled by China Lake and would make a logical extension to the Cuddeback Range. These lands are already disturbed, making them unsuitable for inclusion in either of the adjacent wilderness areas.

The third category is property that lies to the east of the Cuddeback Range and north of the Grass Valley Wilderness Area (approximately 13,500 acres). The Navy routinely uses the airspace above this area and anticipates continuing to use that airspace in the future. However, acquiring this land area would place 640 acres of private property into the middle of South Range of Naval Air Weapons Station, China Lake. Having “an island” of private property in the middle of a Navy range would be awkward, at best. Finally, it is a basic tenet that the Department of Defense should own, or withdraw from the public domain, only the minimum amount of land necessary to meet national security objectives. Based on our analysis of testing and training requirements for this land area, the Department cannot provide a compelling requirement or justification for acquiring the lands north of the Grass Valley Wilderness Area.

In closing, we note that two technical corrections that should be made to the bill. At the lines 4 to 7 and again at lines 17 to 20, the citation “Section 2971(b) of the Military Construction Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014 ...” should be revised to read “Section 2971(b) of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2014...” Second, the map associated with this bill (entitled ‘Cuddeback Land Area’ and dated April 1, 2014) refers to 36 acres of Air Force fee simple lands. Reference to this area should be deleted as Congressional action is not required to transfer management of lands between two components of the Department of Defense.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and I welcome your questions.