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FLIGHTS OVER THE DESERT

“The mission of the Department of Defense is more than aircraft, guns, and missiles. Part of the defense job is protection the lands, waters, timber and wildlife – the priceless natural resources that make this great nation of ours worth defending.” - General Thomas D. White, Chief of Staff, United States Air Force, 1957-81

“Land management agencies safeguard our nation’s heritage through the protection of our natural resources and preservation of our country’s special places for the enjoyment of this and future generations. The U.S. military protects our heritage through a strong national defense to ensure that this and future generations have the freedom to continue to preserve and enjoy these special places. Constructive engagement between these government entities honors their missions.” - John Reynolds, Regional Director, Pacific West Region, National Park Service

Over the years, the southern California desert region has been recognized as containing significant natural and cultural resources. Many opportunities exist for the public to enjoy these resources. As early as 1936, “protected lands,” such as national and state parks, recreation areas and preserves, and wilderness areas were established and managed by various federal and state agencies. Land management agencies are mandated, via laws and regulations, to preserve these resources and provide for their enjoyment.

At the same time, the United States military has used the region since the 1930’s for a host of test and training activities involving aircraft and associated aerospace vehicles. The commanders from the various military services that use the airspace in the region are charged by law and regulation to conduct operations in support of the national defense of this country.

The California Desert Protection Act, passed by Congress in 1994, requires the integration of diverse missions through the protection of resources while ensuring the military’s ability to conduct operations. Congress passed the Act to “...preserve unrivaled scenic, geologic, and wildlife values associated with these unique natural landscapes.” Congress also recognized that “...continued use of the lands and airspace in the California desert region is essential for military purposes...” Congress further directed that “nothing...shall restrict or preclude low-level overflights of military aircraft over such units, including military overflights that can be seen or heard...”

Federal and state agencies work together in interagency forums to network aspects of our diverse missions. The Desert Managers Group formed an Overflights Work Group to enhance regional ecosystem management and act as the mechanism for future collaboration on overflight issues. Primary objectives of the Overflights Work Group include,

Education of agency personnel and the general public about overflight issues
Development of effective working relationships among participating agencies
Coordinate and de-conflict issues
Support problem solving through education and process identification

A cooperative effort between the U.S. Navy and Joshua Tree National Park has already resulted in the elimination or drastic reduction of impacts to park visitors and natural and cultural resources and enhanced opportunities and quality of the training that pilots receive. The Overflights Work Group will continue to seek occasions to resolve issues with additional win-win scenarios.

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