

Feds close hill, prohibit peeking at "secret" base
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By Timothy R. Gaffney
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DAYTON, Oh--If you wanted to climb Freedom Ridge in Nevada for a look at the government's secret desert air base, you're out of luck: The Interior Department has closed the land to the public, finally acting on a nearly two-year-old request by the Air Force.

The unofficially named ridge offered a distant but unobstructed view of a sprawling base whose existence the government refuses to acknowledge. Despite the secrecy, the base has become widely known as Dreamland, Area 51 and Groom Lake, for the dry lakebed where the base is located.

It's said to be the base for everything from experimental Stealth jets to recovered flying saucers.

But hikers hoping for a glimpse of the base Monday found off-limits signs posted around the ridge, local Area 51 investigator Glenn Campbell said from his desert office in Rachel, Nev.

Alan Shepherd, acting area manager for the agency's Bureau of Land Management in Caliente, said the Interior Department reached its decision last week.

It adds 3,972 acres to the 3.5 million of the Air Force's Nellis Range complex, a vast bombing and gunnery range stretching northwest from Las Vegas.

Air Force secretary Sheila Widnall asked the Interior Department to seal off the land in September 1993. The request didn't mention the secret base, but said it simply needed the land ``for the safe and secure operation of the Nellis Range."

``It's outrageous they can get the land for such a flimsy reason," said Campbell, who organized campouts on the ridge and crusaded against its closing in The Desert Rat, an electronic newsletter.

But ``The Air Force lost the battle," Campbell said. ``They actually attracted more attention to their secret base."

Few people knew of the vantage point until the Air Force asked to have it sealed off. After that, the land withdrawal issue became a cause celebre for critics of government security policy, and the ridge, accessible on foot or in four-wheel-drive vehicles, became a minor tourist attraction.

Critics say the government is only keeping the base secret from U.S. citizens. They note that Russia and the former Soviet Union have observed it with spy satellites for years.

In March 1994, the Dayton Daily News published a special report that included photos and Russian satellite images of the base.

Under the international Open Skies Treaty, foreign nations will be allowed to overfly and photograph any U.S. military base, including Dreamland.

The base will still be visible from public land. Campbell said he and others have observed it from Tickaboo Peak, a more distant but higher mountain northeast of Groom Lake.