

TITLE: CLASSIFIED BASE STAYS UNNAMED

SUBTITLE: The military "operating location near Groom Lake" will be identified as such in an environmental lawsuit.

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A federal judge has ruled that national security would be compromised if the name of the Pentagon's operating location near Groom Lake was disclosed in an environmental lawsuit.

U.S. District Judge Philip Pro, in a ruling made available Friday, said that classified information given to him in court chambers by U.S. Secretary of the Air Force Sheila Widnall justified keeping the facility's name under wraps.

Jonathan Turley, the attorney representing former air base workers suing the government for environmental violations, has referred to the base in court motions several times as Area 51, a designation the government has denied.

Turley argues the name of the base is a central issue in the lawsuits, which claim the government is using secrecy to hide illegal, open-pit burning of hazardous chemicals at the facility, which is on a dry lake bed 35 miles west of Alamo in Lincoln County.

"All I can say is that it's important to keep perspective," Turley said Friday after reading the decision. "This is the first ruling in a series of rulings. While we strongly disagree with the court, we will continue to press Judge Pro to enforce the law against these defendants."

Turley said an appeal of Friday's decision will be pursued.

"The defendants have claimed they can withhold the location of documents under their theory of national security," Turley said. "We're confident that we'll be able to show the use of privilege is excessive in this case."

Widnall, in an unclassified declaration, said that the classified information, if released, "could reasonably be expected to cause exceptionally grave damage to national security."

The base has no actual operating name per se, Widnall stated. But she told Pro that revealing the program names would compromise base missions, military operations, intelligence sources,

technological matters, contracting relationships and "security sensitive environmental data."

"Collection of information regarding the air, water and soil is a classic foreign intelligence practice because analysis of these samples can result in the identification of military operations a capabilities," Widnall argued.

She said the presence or absence of certain chemicals could reveals classified operations and that disclosure "increases the risk to the lives of United States personnel and decreases the probability of successful mission accomplishments."

Thus, Widnall invoked military state's secrets privilege.

Pro rejected the government's argument that Turley's request was "vague and overbroad."

But he said that Turley "simply failed to demonstrate a compelling need" for the name and that the government's reference to the base as "the operating location near Groom Lake" was good enough for the lawsuit's purposes.

"Plaintiffs would like the government to acknowledge that terms such as Area 51 or Dreamland are used," Pro's ruling said.

"Although the use of these names might be common among the general public, possibly because of the so-called "black" nature of the facility in question... these names would not be responsive to (Turley's request)."

Turley had filed a 300-page exhibit with the court asserting the government referred to the base numerous times in public documents such as the Congressional Record, defense trade publications, government contractor correspondence and federal employee publications.

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Photo: Telephotoe view of Groom base from Freedom Ridge.

Caption: The Air Force's operating location sits on the dry Groom Lake bed at the base of a ridge near the Nevada Test Site, 35 miles west of Alamo in Lincoln County.

Photo credit: Mark Farmer/Special to the Review-Journal.