

"E.T. Highway" Raises Earthly Concerns

By Glenn Campbell

Governor Miller and the Twentieth Century Fox Film Corp. have planned an extravagant unveiling this week for the new "Extraterrestrial Highway" in Lincoln County. The two-day event begins in Las Vegas on Wednesday with a gala reception at Planet Hollywood hosted by Miller. The next morning, a convoy of dignitaries, press and public will depart at 10:00 am from the Las Vegas Convention Center for the tiny town of Rachel, 150 miles north. There, Fox is putting on a big production to unveil the new highway signs and promote its forthcoming movie, "Independence Day."

The aliens at Area 51 may be pleased with their new highway, but to ordinary earthlings the state has violated nearly every rule of responsible government. No one asked the citizens or elected officials of Lincoln County whether they wanted an E.T. Highway. This is a Carson City production, funded and directed by the Fox studio, with virtually no consideration of local impact.

The bill to rename State Route 375 failed last year in the Nevada Senate when Transportation chairman Bill O'Donnell refused to schedule it for hearing. He called the bill "frivolity" and said the legislature had better uses for its time. The measure would have died there if not for the efforts of one "Ambassador Merlin," a lobbyist in Carson City who believes he is an alien. At the urging of the ambassador and the state tourism commission, Governor Miller bypassed the legislature two months ago by authorizing the highway's name change through the Nevada Transportation Board.

Miller then flew to Los Angeles to finalize a deal with Fox to promote their movie at the unveiling ceremonies. Under an agreement that Miller's office will not discuss in detail, Fox is now providing the lavish production, while the governor and his entourage need only show up with the road signs. Thus, Nevada has entered a Brave New World in which private companies fund, organize and drive state events in exchange for publicity, while directly affected Nevadans are excluded.

"Independence Day" is an uncredited remake of "War of the Worlds." In the movie, evil aliens kill billions and wipe out most of the world's major cities. The President and a few other survivors take refuge at a fictionalized Area 51, which is the film's only connection to Nevada. It is reasonable for a governor to promote Nevada locations for filming, but the scenes supposedly taking place here were filmed in Utah instead. Now the governor is rewarding that behavior with a massive publicity bonanza.

Miller did not visit the highway itself during this process, and no local hearing was ever held to solicit the concerns of residents. No one from the state seems to have given any thought to the real effects of this designation and the new kind of publicity it has created. Until now, visitors were fairly sophisticated, having conducted at least enough research to find this lonely road. Now the state is giving the highway a friendly name to attract the most naive and ill-equipped kind of tourist, those who usually pull slot machine handles in Las Vegas.

The "E.T. Highway" implies to tourists that they will see UFOs here. Upon arrival, however, there is nothing for most people to do but wander the desert and try to get closer to Area 51, the secure military facility west of the highway where most of the UFO stories seem to be centered.

That's when things get messy, because this tense and poorly marked military boundary has little respect for tourism or civil rights. Nevada's vague trespassing law allows the border to be marked only by narrow orange posts spaced 200 feet apart, without signs. Dozens of tourists have already inadvertently crossed this line. The anonymous security guards patrolling the area are not held accountable by any public authority and are legally authorized to kill. Although they have never exercised that option, guns in the face and rough physical treatment are the usual reception for any innocent mistake.

Once charged, accused trespassers are found "guilty until proven innocent" in the local justice court and are fined \$600. Sheriff's deputies testify in proxy for the unnamed security guards. Deputies also seize film and video tape from tourists and journalists on public land without warrant, and the material vanishes without record. The Lincoln County Sheriff's

Dept. has asserted in court that any photographs taken from the highway are subject to seizure if military mountaintops appear in the distance.

Many serious state issues at Area 51 are still pending, including claims of environmental, civil rights and tax abuses. The governor has chosen to deal with these problems by attracting still more tourists to the area and turning over the proceedings to a private company. While this may indeed encourage changes at the base by harassing the guards, it will come at the cost of many ruined vacations.

Because it was seen as a "fun" designation without great importance, the governor apparently felt he could ignore the rules about local public hearings and the separation of state and commerce. There may indeed be intelligent life elsewhere in the universe, but it is hard to find it in Carson City.

Glenn Campbell is Director of the Area 51 Research Center in Rachel. More information on the "E.T. Highway" can be found at <http://www.ufomind.com/highway>.

HTML by Area 51 Research Center, 4/12/96.