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Title: State wildlife officials reach hunting pact with Nellis Air Force Base

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State wildlife officials tentatively have reached a pact with Nellis Air Force Base that would allow hunting for about one month each year on part of the base's massive range complex.

Mike Cox, a biologist with the Nevada Division of Wildlife, said Monday his agency would like to see more concessions from Air Force officials, but the agreement "probably is as good as we're going to get from the military."

"It shouldn't be this way, but the thing you learn in dealing with the Air Force is that you take what little they give you when you can get it," Cox said.

The agreement comes more than a decade after the Air Force withdrew 89,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management wilderness in 1984 to use as a buffer zone around the classified Area 51 - or Groom Lake air base - in Lincoln County.

When the Air Force neglected to mitigate or compensate for that withdrawal as required by Congress, Cox and his staff asked that Nevadans be able to use land within the 3.5 million-acre Nellis Range Complex for hunting and other recreational uses.

Air Force officials responded by earmarking 16,640 acres at Stonewall Mountain near Goldfield strictly for use by hunters during the bighorn sheep hunting season, which typically lasts for one month in the fall.

The 8,300-foot, pinion-covered mountain is considered a prime hunting ground not only for bighorns but also for mule deer and chukars. Under the proposed pact, it would remain under Air Force ownership and be restricted from the public the rest of the year.

Cox said he will encourage Nellis officials to allow hikers and bird watchers access to Stonewall Mountain throughout the year, although he is skeptical they will allow it.

The Air Force officer representing the base in the talks declined Monday to be interviewed.

Nellis officials have assured the state that the area, which has never been used for target practice, is free of unexploded bombs. Nevertheless, the Air Force wants to require hunters to take safety courses teaching them to avoid metal pieces or unexploded ordnance that might be on the ground.

Cox said that stipulation is holding up the agreement and needlessly bogging down his agency with red tape.

"If it's true that there are no bombs out there in the first place, then why should anyone have to take precautions?" he asked. "There's no safety issue out there, although they're making this into one.

"It's just an extra headache they're asking us to face."

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