

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

August 23, 2021

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III
United States Department of Defense
1400 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301-1400

Dear Secretary Austin:

The U.S. Air Force has plans underway to expand low-level training flights from the Mountain Home Air Force Base into the Owyhee Canyonlands of Malheur County, Oregon, which is a significant and treasured Eastern Oregon landscape. So far, there has been no public notice of these plans nor any public hearings on the subject in Oregon. We request the Department of Defense to provide a public hearing in Oregon and an additional 30 days for public comment on the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), so that Oregonians have an opportunity to voice any and all concerns.

The Air Force's draft EIS proposes alternatives that would dramatically lower altitudes for flights—including supersonic flights—over the Owyhee Canyonlands. These pristine lands support wildlife habitat, including a large area of priority sage grouse habitat, as well as indigenous cultural sites, recreation visitors and traditional ranch operations.

Last Congress, we introduced the Malheur Community Empowerment for the Owyhee Act, which would formally establish one million acres of wilderness within Malheur County's Wilderness Study Areas. The work that our staff did with a group of stakeholders and scientists helped to surface the challenges of this area and its ecological and cultural significance. We designed processes to safeguard and protect the lands, improve rangeland habitat, and celebrate this public lands treasure.

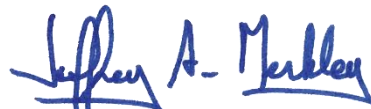
While we support the U.S. military and recognize the importance of training capacity, pursuing this path of operation without giving the public the opportunity to participate in the process or raise questions and voice concerns about these plans is shortsighted. We understand that the public comment period has already been extended to September 22, 2021, and request that you grant an additional 30 days so that Oregonians and others can be informed and participate. We also request a public hearing in Malheur County.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We greatly appreciate your dedication to our national defense.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator