

# Prepared Testimony of the Honorable Douglas J. Nicholls

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*Mayor, City of Yuma, Arizona* <sup>[1]</sup>

*Before the House Natural Resources Committee*

*Subcommittee on Federal Lands*

*Regarding H.R. 8686, the Yuma Proving Ground Land Withdrawal*

*May 19, 2026*

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee: <sup>[2]</sup>

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the City of Yuma, Arizona, in support of H.R. 8686 and the withdrawal and reservation of approximately 22,000 acres of federal land in the vicinity of U.S. Army Yuma Proving Ground. I appear today, as the Mayor of the City of Yuma, to provide the perspective of a community that proudly lives every day with the responsibilities and benefits of being a defense community. <sup>[3]</sup>

Yuma is proud to be home to two premier military installations: U.S. Army Yuma Proving Ground and Marine Corps Air Station Yuma. These missions are not distant federal activities to us. They are woven into our workforce, our schools, our infrastructure planning, our small businesses, and our civic identity.

The legislation before this Subcommittee would withdraw approximately 21,783 acres between the existing YPG boundary and US 95, and approximately another 249 acres associated with the Howard Cantonment area for Army use. The bill would add these lands to the framework of the Military Land Withdrawals Act of 2013 and reserve them for Yuma Proving Ground's mission, subject to valid existing rights and applicable federal land management requirements. <sup>[3]</sup>

Yuma strongly supports this action.

## **Yuma Proving Ground is an economic anchor for our community and our state.**

Yuma Proving Ground is one of the most important economic engines in southwestern Arizona. YPG is the Army's premier test center, home to the longest overland artillery range in the nation, and a major center supporting Army modernization and Project Convergence. The installation is one of Yuma County's top civilian employers, with more than 2,000 civilian personnel. Its combined direct, indirect, and induced economic impact is in excess of \$1.1 billion annually. <sup>[4]</sup>

For a community of our size, that impact is enormous. It supports local contractors, engineers, tradespeople, mechanics, logistics firms, restaurants, housing, schools, and families. It gives young people in Yuma a pathway into technical careers without leaving home. It strengthens a regional economy that also depends on agriculture, logistics, tourism, cross border commerce, aerospace, and advanced manufacturing.

Yuma County's economic development is comprised of agriculture, MCAS Yuma, US Army Yuma Proving Ground, tourism, health care, advanced manufacturing, food processing, aerospace, and logistics as core regional assets. The County reports that agriculture produces nearly \$3.4 billion annually and that Yuma Proving Ground represents approximately \$1.12 billion in economic activity. <sup>[5]</sup>

Yuma's economy is diverse, and its core stability depends on the continued strength of both agriculture and defense. The withdrawal proposed in H.R. 8686 directly supports that stability. It protects the Army's ability to conduct modern testing in a location that has the workforce, airspace, infrastructure, and community support.

## **The withdrawal provides mission stability and public safety.**

From the community perspective, mission stability and public safety are inseparable. The Army has made clear that the purpose of this withdrawal is to support advanced air delivery and aviation testing by providing the surface safety zones necessary to contain risk on federal land. Modern guided parachute systems and aerial delivery technologies require higher altitudes, greater offsets, and more complex tactical scenarios than the current land boundary can safely support. <sup>[6]</sup>

The Final Legislative Environmental Impact Statement explains that the additional land is needed as a safety buffer for testing advanced air delivery technologies and aviation systems to their limits. It further states that, without the withdrawal, mission required drops would not be scheduled as they could land outside the current YPG boundary and result in injury or death to members of the public. <sup>[6]</sup>

The proposed boundary also makes sense on the ground. Extending the YPG boundary to US 95 creates a clear, visible, physical landmark. The Final LEIS notes that the current boundary between YPG and adjacent BLM lands lacks a continuous physical marker and that this has contributed to unintentional public intrusions onto YPG. Using US 95 as the boundary improves public understanding and public safety. <sup>[6]</sup>

The current boundary limits guided parachute releases to approximately 25,000 feet, while the requested land would support testing up to approximately 35,000 feet while keeping the required surface safety zone contained. That is a direct readiness benefit and a direct public safety benefit. Surface safety zones are not abstract technical requirements. They are the areas that keep the public away from hazardous operations and protect people in the event of equipment error, parachute drift, or system failure.

From the community perspective, this is exactly how federal land decisions should be made: match the boundary to the mission, reduce confusion, and improve safety for both the public and the installation.

## **The Howard Cantonment withdrawal resolves a long-standing land status issue.**

The legislation includes approximately 249 acres associated with the Howard Cantonment area. This area has been used continuously by YPG since 1955 and contains testing and training infrastructure, but the prior withdrawal authority expired in 2003. <sup>[3]</sup>

From a local government perspective, this portion of the bill is good housekeeping. It aligns legal status with actual long-term use. It provides certainty for the Army, the Department of the Interior, and neighboring communities. It also avoids unnecessary ambiguity for land use planning, infrastructure coordination, and future investment.

## **The proposal balances readiness with responsible natural resources management.**

Yuma understands the value of land, water, wildlife habitat, cultural resources, and public access in our desert region. Our support for this withdrawal is based on the belief that the bill provides an existing, responsible framework that has a proven track record for decades at YPG.

The bill would allow the continuance of resource management activities, including conservation of wildlife and wildlife habitat, preservation of cultural resources, wildfire management, recreation, public access, hunting, and management of wild horses and burros. It preserves the Parker-Blaisdell Utility Corridor and authorizes continued rights-of-way for critical regional utility infrastructure, including transmission lines, so the withdrawal does not interfere with regional energy reliability or future utility needs. <sup>[3]</sup>

The Final LEIS process evaluated biological resources, cultural resources, land use, recreation, socioeconomics, air quality, greenhouse gas, and environmental justice. It concluded that the proposed action would have less than significant effects on all evaluated resources, with minor adverse effects to land use and recreation, and that the Army's environmental compliance requirements would be the same as those for BLM. The Final LEIS states that future actions would require consultation under the National Historic Preservation

Act and Endangered Species Act where appropriate. The public is very favorable to these oversights as currently performed by YPG on the existing facilities.<sup>[6]</sup>

YPG emphasizes natural resource stewardship. The installation's natural resources program uses an Integrated Natural Resources Management Plan to sustain the military mission while managing ecological health. YPG coordinates natural resource management with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Arizona Game and Fish Department. The installation also administers a hunting permit program, with range clearance and safety requirements, for designated hunting areas. Public land users like the Yuma Road and Gun Club are supportive of the hunting and management programs proposed as they are currently in place. <sup>[7]</sup>

The public involvement record also matters. Concerns were raised about wildlife habitat, wildlife corridors, recreation, off highway vehicle access, cultural resources, and private property access. The Final LEIS process, tribal consultation, and ongoing resource management plans provide the right structure for addressing those concerns while protecting the safety of the public and the readiness of the mission.

This is the right balance. The withdrawal protects the mission while maintaining a framework for wildlife conservation, cultural resource protection, safe hunting access, and continued federal environmental compliance.

### **The affected land is compatible with the proposed military use.**

The land at issue is adjacent to an existing major military test installation in a remote portion of the state. The requested area is undeveloped, public use is minimal except for hunting, there is no mining, grazing, or other industrial use, and mineral potential is low. This proposal is not placing an unrelated military use into the middle of an incompatible community landscape. It is aligning an existing defense mission with adjacent land that is already functionally connected to that mission and that can be managed more safely and predictably under a clear congressional withdrawal.

### **Yuma is a recognized defense community because our support is real.**

In 2025, the City of Yuma was named a Great American Defense Community by the Association of Defense Communities in conjunction with USAA, one of only three communities nationwide selected for that year's honor and only one of 51 cities total in America. That designation recognizes exceptional support for military installations and the people who serve. <sup>[8]</sup>

We are proud of that designation: it reflects the way Yuma truly operates. The City integrates military considerations into development and infrastructure planning, aligning local growth with national defense priorities. Yuma's recognition also highlights our investment in education and workforce development, including Purple Star School efforts, programs such as the Dandelion Club and Student Ambassadors, and career transition pathways such as SkillBridge, Arizona@Work - Yuma County, and the Veterans Education & Training Services Program at Arizona Western College. <sup>[9]</sup>

The Association of Defense Communities recognizes Yuma's long standing military history, policy advocacy, infrastructure planning, and support for military connected students and families. <sup>[9]</sup>

This is what community support looks like in practice: planning compatible growth, supporting military families, building workforce pathways, protecting public safety, and making sure the missions at YPG and MCAS Yuma can succeed without being crowded out by preventable land use conflicts.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Yuma supports H.R. 8686 because it is practical, necessary, and consistent with our community's values.

The withdrawal provides practical protection for a very critical local and national asset by making common sense additions to YPG. The Howard Cantonment 249 acres memorializes the historic use of the land as it is

generally treated today. The US 95 area “squares off” a practical narrow portion delineated by US 95 in a remote portion of the State for an effective testing use.

The expansion of the safety drop zone helps secure YPG into the future as it ensures that YPG can meet the future challenges in testing, ensuring jobs as well as national security.

YPG’s historical treatment of the land is proof positive of how the newly withdrawn land will be treated environmentally, historically, and culturally. The community is confident that historical artifacts will be protected, wildlife will be positively managed and public access for hunting will be maintained.

And finally, Yuma is proud to have YPG in our community, and we support the amazing mission of providing our warfighters the right equipment to protect our nation and our freedoms.

On behalf of the City of Yuma, I respectfully urge the Subcommittee to support the withdrawal and reservation of these lands for U.S. Army Yuma Proving Ground.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

## Relevant Source Links

The testimony includes embedded source markers. The links below are provided for reference and review.

- [\[1\] City of Yuma Mayor and Council: Douglas J. Nicholls listed as Mayor](#)
- [\[2\] House Natural Resources Committee: 119th Congress Federal Lands Subcommittee Chair announcement](#)
- [\[3\] Congressman Paul Gosar: H.R. 8686 announcement and bill background](#)
- [\[4\] U.S. Army Yuma Proving Ground: official installation overview, mission, employment, and economic impact](#)
- [\[5\] Yuma County Economic Development Basics: regional industry assets and economic activity](#)
- [\[6\] Federal Register: Final Legislative Environmental Impact Statement notice for US 95 land withdrawal](#)
- [\[7\] U.S. Army YPG Directorate of Public Works: natural resources management and hunting program information](#)
- [\[8\] City of Yuma: 2025 Great American Defense Community announcement](#)
- [\[9\] Association of Defense Communities: 2025 Great American Defense Communities recognized communities](#)
- [\[10\] City of Yuma: Yuma 2025 Joint Land Use Plan information](#)
- [Congress.gov: H.R. 8686](#)

## Provided Materials Referenced

The following materials were provided for the preparation of this draft. In the accompanying source package, these links are relative to the Word document and resolve to the source\_materials folder.

- [Discussion draft bill text \(GOSAR\\_086\\_xml MF.pdf\)](#)
- [LEIS Key Information \(LEIS Key Information.docx\)](#)
- [Army written statement draft \(YPG Land Withdrawal MG Gaydon Written Statement Draft 6 MAY 26.docx\)](#)
- [Army land-withdrawal slides \(YPG Land Withdrawal Slides.pptx\)](#)