

Declassification of Area 51 may spur tourists

By Adam Nagourney, New York Times

RACHEL, Nev. — The Little A'Le'Inn has been an unlikely tourist destination in the Mojave Desert for nearly 25 years, selling souvenirs — from green alien coffee cups to E.T. Highway T-shirts — dedicated to the notion that we are not alone. Understandably.

Nine miles up a nearby dirt road is the top-secret military installation known as Area 51, whose murky provenance fueled decades of speculation about extraterrestrial aliens and kept the U.F.O.-hunting tourists coming.

Or rather, the top-secret military installation not known as Area 51 — at least until last week, when the CIA released a classified report on the history of the U-2 spy plane, which officially acknowledged what everyone here has long known: There is a secret military testing base at Groom Lake called Area 51. It is 150 miles north by car from Las Vegas, in a vast expanse of utterly empty scabland, desert and mountain, and signs reading “No gas station next 150 miles.”

The report, released after eight years of prodding by a George Washington University archivist researching the history of the U-2, made no mention of colonies of alien life, suggesting that the secret base was dedicated to the relatively more mundane task of testing spy planes.

But no matter. Even this little bit of validation was welcome in Rachel, which claimed a population of 57 as of last Tuesday afternoon, and where the tourists have not been coming at quite the pace they once did. The movies and television shows that once fed an international fixation with aliens secreted at Area 51 — from “The X Files” to movies like “Independence

Day” and “Paul” – are, with the passage of time and the inevitable rise of new subjects of national interest, not quite as gripping as they once were.

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