

The Australian Defence Force was forced to restrict air space at RAAF Base Pearce as a high-powered 0.50 calibre sniper rifle was fired during a demonstration to promote new gun laws, according to reports.

Premier Mark McGowan, then-police commissioner Chris Dawson and Police Minister Paul Papalia attended the media event at a rifle range in March 2022 to illustrate why the high-powered weapons needed to be taken off the streets.

The McGowan Government is overhauling WA's "outdated" firearms legislation, which had previously not been touched for several decades.

According to News Corp reports on Monday, documents released under Freedom of Information showed police were given warnings from its own officers, the SAS and RAAF about the demonstration.

In one document, an SAS warrant officer said he "considers the activity would be extremely unsafe and would pose serious risk to property and persons" which he said as a defence force member he "cannot support".

Another document from an RAAF Pearce squadron leader reportedly flagged "the impact to flying operations is significant for a non-ADF and non-priority activity" and asked for other rifle ranges to be considered.

It was reported he tried to call the desk phones and mobiles of WA Police "with no luck" to coordinate air traffic control and squadron movements and "with the short notice and lack of information it is presenting a safety operational risk at this time".

An urgent Notice to Airmen then had to be issued for danger to a height of 18,000ft for flights about the airbase and inbound from Perth for two days, between 8am and 3pm, to avoid ricochet threat as the media event went ahead.

In response, WA Police said it was assessed as safe to use the range for the demonstration with the rifle, which cost taxpayers \$8500.

"Assessment of the range used raised a number of potential issues that were discussed with key stakeholders, including the RAAF who control the airspace over the range," a spokeswoman said.

"All of the issues were addressed with mitigation strategies suggested by a subject matter expert in the use of these types of weapons and ranges, including a direct line of communications with RAAF Pearce for the duration of the demonstration."

National Shooting Council vice president told the publication that it was an "orchestrated media event to create fear in the community ... they were clearly told it was too risky but they went ahead anyway".

"There was a very, very high risk of ricochets and therefore injury to members of the public, press and police attending because of the type of targets they were shooting at ... they were very lucky to get away with it with no-one being injured, killed or worse for this little sh\*t show," he said.

WA Police said the rifle served “multiple purposes” for the force, including use as a reference firearm in the ballistic library, which is used to test firing and forensic comparisons for criminal investigations.

Transport Minister Rita Saffioti — one of the most senior in the McGowan Government — on Monday said she had not been briefed on the issue.

“All I can say is that we take... the process of governing very seriously and we continue to work very, very hard for the community,” she said.

“In relation to how things happen or how press conferences are organised, I’m sure it was done in the right way and I’m sure again it was communicating... a very, very significant issue, which is gun ownership in the community.”