

Proposed Expansion of the Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Air Combat Center into the BLM Johnson Valley Off Highway Vehicle Open Area

BACKGROUND

The Desert Advisory Council received a presentation on March 26, 2011, on the proposed expansion of the Twentynine Palms Marine Corps Air Combat Center into the BLM Johnson Valley Off Highway Vehicle Open Area.

On July 27, 2012 the Department of the Navy released their Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) for the proposed expansion which advances Alternative 6, the alternative with the greatest permanent closure impact on Johnson Valley OHV Open Area, as their preferred alternative.

Alternative 6 looks to expand the base into 146,000 acres of the 188,000 acre OHV Open area, currently the largest OHV Open Area in the country. 108,000 acres of this new base land would be fully closed to the public, and the remaining 38,000 acres would be designated a Restricted Public Access Area closed to the public for two months of each year.

Arising out of concerns over the potential affect on the local economy, and on OHV recreation in Southern California, the successful Bartlett Amendment (Amendment 243) to the Defense Authorization Act bars the Secretary of the Navy from spending funds on the project until specific studies were completed.

The studies include fully reviewing impacts to the local economy, the displacement of OHV and other recreation, and the option of non-live fire use by the Marines under an exclusive permit from the BLM rather than acquiring the land.

The proposed motion recommends that an alternative be studied that allows the Marine Corps the exclusive use of the expanded training area under a BLM permit. This would require that troop movement be redirected onto the base for live fire training exercises, but would not require an expensive and cumbersome land transfer.

With each FEIS action alternative calling for a transfer of land management, we believe the process would be better served by consideration of an alternative that does not require a land transfer.

Please know that the recreation community wants the Marine Corps to meet all of its current and future training needs. Many of them have served this great country with honor in the armed forces and hold a personal commitment to our nation's strong defense.

Nonetheless, there is a great deal of opposition to the proposed expansion. There have been 22,000 letters of written, a petition to the White House with over 26,000 signatures gathered, and, by the Marine Corps own testimony, over 100,000 public comments received in opposition to the proposed expansion. Members of the

conservation community are concerned that Alternative 6 will lead to the estimated take of between 645 and 3,769 federally threatened desert tortoises over the life of the project -- between 503 and 834 of those would be in the newly acquired lands.

We understand that such an alternative would not be a perfect scenario for the Marines. But it would meet the minimum requirements set forth by the Marines, and it would only require a BLM permit for the time necessary for exercises to occur. Such an scenario would preserve the delicate economies of nearby communities by allowing for continued intensive recreation. Furthermore, it would retain management of the land with the agency that knows better how to manage it, the BLM.

RESOLUTION

Recommending that Bureau of Land Management urge the United States Marine Corps to study an additional alternative in its proposed expansion into the BLM's Johnson Valley Off Highway Vehicle Open Use Area.

- Whereas the size and scope of the proposed Training Land Acquisition and Airspace Establishment project is of such magnitude that it has brought about the need for a greater depth of review and alternatives;
- Whereas the Bartlett Amendment (Amendment 243) to the Defense Authorization Act requires further studies with regard to alternatives for the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms proposed expansion, such as allowing Marine Corps training activities under a BLM permit;
- Whereas an additional alternative based on Alternative Four would: a) address both the requirements of the Marine Corps and the concerns set forth in the Bartlett Amendment; b) preserve the integrity of nearby communities; and c) allow the continuation of responsible OHV and other recreation at Johnson Valley;
- Whereas public opposition to the current expansion plan has generated some 22,000 letters of opposition, a White House petition with over 26,000 signatures, and over 100,000 public comments as reported by the Marine Corps;
- Whereas the BLM is better qualified than the Marine Corps to manage recreation and exclusive use permits;

Therefore, the Desert Advisory Council recommends that there be a new alternative that better meets the needs of both the Marine Corps and the public by:

1. redirecting troop movement so that any "Live Fire" Training requirements continue to take place on the existing base consistent with the Department of Defense's stated maximum need for use of the area twice per year for twelve days each; and
2. allowing Marine Corp training activities under an exclusive use permit issued by the BLM.