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## TORTOISES; Army acquires 250,000 acres for reptile in Mojave Desert

The Army has purchased 250,000 acres of former ranch and railroad land in California's western Mojave Desert -- the latest compensation efforts in its years-long attempt to move forward with controversial plans to expand military training activities onto endangered species habitat. The new land purchases, which have been accomplished over the last several months, will eventually be managed as habitat for threatened desert tortoises. The acquisition serves as an offset to free the Army to start training its forces on 118,000 acres of federal land it acquired three years ago.

The desert tortoise is listed as a threatened species under federal and California versions of the Endangered Species Act. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Geological Survey.

That land was acquired to expand training exercises at Fort Irwin, which is located north of Barstow, Calif., but over half of it is critical habitat for the tortoise and the endangered Lane Mountain milk-vetch.

The move is part of the federal government's ongoing efforts to try to balance the military's desire to use land with the needs of the species that dwell on it.

But environmentalists are not sure the new land acquisition will result in a fair trade-off.

"You can't just swap land for land," said Daniel Patterson of the Center for Biological Diversity. "The valley is critical habitat for the healthiest tortoise population in the western Mojave, one acre of that cannot equal another."

The Superior Valley, which lies to the southwest of Fort Irwin, has been at the heart of the battle between tortoises and tanks. Patterson and other environmentalists maintain that the area is vital for the tortoise's survival, while the Army considers it an ideal area to train troops with tanks.

Over 1,200 desert tortoises dwell in the 75,000 acres of critical habitat that falls within the boundaries of the Army's planned new training expansion, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The 643,000-acre Fort Irwin is home to the National Training Center, which the Army says is the only training facility in the world that is equipped for force-on-force and live fire training of heavy brigade-sized military forces. Thousands of soldiers come every month to undergo training exercises at the center.

Two North Carolina Army National Guard soldiers train to blow a hole in a barbed wire obstacle with inert torpedoes at the Army's National Training Center at Fort Irwin. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army/Master Sgt. Bob Haskell.

The 2002 National Defense Authorization Act included language to allow Fort Irwin to expand its training facilities by another 118,000 acres. But since federally protected species dwelt on the land, the army had to develop a mitigation plan, which gained the approval of the Fish and Wildlife Service last spring (Land Letter, April 1, 2004).

That plan included requirements to set aside land for the species, which led to the recent land acquisitions.

Lois Grunwald of the Ventura, Calif., FWS office said a working group of officials from FWS, the Army, Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Geological Survey will assess the ranchland areas to decide how they should be restored for the tortoise.

One hitch in the animal's recovery could be the physical process of moving it to the new land. Grunwald

said there are no current plans to move the tortoises, but Army officials are looking into that option.

The moving of tortoises -- or "translocation" -- is controversial because some of them may be harmed in the process. In past biological opinions, FWS has estimated that about 140 desert tortoises -- which are very susceptible to disease -- could die during translocation from the training areas.

And Patterson said another problem with the mitigation plan is what he considers a lack of protection for the Lane Mountain milk-vetch. He said the vetch is in even more danger because as a plant, it can't be moved. "It has nowhere to go," he said.

The expansion area includes three of the four known occurrences of the milk-vetch, a perennial plant that belongs to the pea family.

But Grunwald said the Army is setting up two conservation areas on Fort Irwin, as well as a "no dig zone," where tanks are not allowed to interfere with the plant.