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Marines eye 400,000 acres for training expansion at Twentynine Palms



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By **DAVID DANELSKI**
The Press-Enterprise

The federal government is evaluating more than 400,000 acres of public and private land -- including a major off-road vehicle recreation area -- for an expansion of the Marine Corps training center at Twentynine Palms.

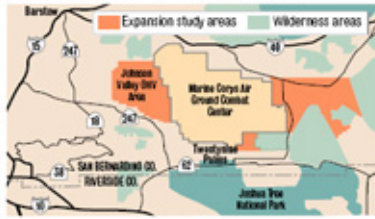
Marine Corps officials said they need more territory for weapons testing and live-ammunition exercises for 3,000 or more troops.

The U.S. Navy has identified 424,000 acres of public, private and state land for possible addition to the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center. The acreage is roughly two-thirds the size of the existing training center in San Bernardino County.

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MILITARY'S DESERT TRAINING PLANS

The U.S. Marine Corps wants to expand its 932-square-mile Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms to better handle stepped-up training. The 658 square miles of public and private land being studied for the expansion includes the largest off-highway vehicle play area in the country and extends to the edges of several wilderness areas.



WHO OWNS THE LAND IN THE EXPANSION AREA:

- 341,400 acres Federal government
- 75,780 acres Privately owned
- 6,820 acres State of California

ANTI-TERROR TRAINING:



The Marine Corps would expand its Twentynine Palms combat center by as much as two-thirds. Troops sent to the center fight mock battles in simulated Middle East terrain during anti-terror training. The expansion would allow three battalions to maneuver, using live ammunition with air support.

TO BE TESTED AT THE SITE: Training would include weapons system training with two high-profile military aircraft:



MV-22 OSPREY

The tilt-rotor Osprey can land and take off vertically. It was envisioned as an ideal craft for moving troops swiftly in rough terrain but sparked much debate because of its cost and two-decade development time. Pattern of Osprey accidents left 30 people dead from 1991 to 2000. Human error and mechanical problems were blamed. Military officials said earlier this year that the Ospreys deployed in Iraq are achieving their goal—transporting troops faster and more safely than helicopters.



F-35 JOINT STRIKE FIGHTER

Nicknamed Lightning II, the F-35 is a stealth fighter intended to replace aging aircraft used by the Marine Corps, Air Force and Navy, including the Harrier jet, the F-16 and the F-18. Three versions are being developed and tested. The Marine plane will take off on short runways and land vertically. The project might be the largest defense contract ever, \$275 billion over 20 years.

THE EXPANSION SITE INCLUDES:



OFF-ROAD RECREATION

Johnson Valley Off-Highway Vehicle Area is a 189,000-acre mecca for motorcyclists and other off-road enthusiasts.

OTHER FEATURES

- Habitats for threatened desert tortoises and other wildlife
- Amboy Crater
- Bristol Dry Lake
- Hundreds of miles of public dirt roads

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The U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which oversees most of the land the military seeks, published an official notice this week that puts a two-year halt on any new uses on that land, including mining claims and solar installations.

The land includes most of the Johnson Valley Off-Highway Vehicle Area, a 189,000-acre mecca for motorcyclists and other off-roading enthusiasts. It also contains habitat for threatened desert tortoises, bighorn sheep and other wildlife.

Motorcycle enthusiasts and environmentalists both said they have concerns about the plan.

The area encompasses an array of geological features, such as Bristol Dry Lake, known for its salt mining; Amboy Crater and the surrounding lava fields; and the Sheephole Mountains and Cadiz Valley. It also borders several wilderness areas.

The expansion area has more than 450 active mining claims for sand and gravel, iron, gold, copper and other materials, according to a report released by the military. Claim holders would be reimbursed if their claims become part of the Marine property, a federal official said.

The expansion plan covers more than 341,000 acres of public land, 75,780 acres in private ownership and 6,820 acres of state property. It will be the subject of detailed environmental study and ultimately requires approval from Congress and the president, a process expected to take three to five years, said Mickey Quillman, resources chief for the BLM's Barstow office.

Existing uses and public access will continue until then, he said.

If the Marines get the necessary approvals, expanded training exercises are expected to start by 2015.

The additional territory is necessary to create a training area where three battalions could maneuver simultaneously using live ammunition accompanied by air support, Marine officials said.

Each battalion would have about 1,000 Marines aided by other troops performing command and logistics duties, Marine spokeswoman Capt. Amy Malugani said by telephone from Twentynine Palms.

The training would bolster national security by enhancing the Marines' ability to conduct the small-scale operations needed to fight terrorists, according to a Navy letter to U.S. Department of Interior officials. Exercises would involve weapons systems on the MV-22 Osprey vertical takeoff aircraft and the Joint Strike Fighter, the Marines' first stealth jet.

A Navy research group looked at 11 other potential training sites in the nation, including Fort Bragg and Camp Pendleton, but only Twentynine Palms had sufficient airspace and land to meet the training requirements, according to the Navy's application to acquire public lands.

Malugani said the military would work to minimize its impact on the environment and nearby communities.

"We are only going to acquire what we would need to accomplish the mission," Malugani said.

Recreational Space

Environmentalists and off-roaders both are worried about losing public land to the military.

Johnson Valley is used by thousands of motorcyclists and four-wheeler enthusiasts and is the largest officially designated off-roading area in the United States, said Jerry Graybow, president of the American Motorcycle Association's District 37, which covers most of Southern California.

"We understand the Marines need to train, but OHV users need to have areas to recreate as well," Graybow said.

If the military takes control of Johnson Valley, off-roaders would like to see replacement lands, he said.

Officials with the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group with offices in Los Angeles, said the study area includes habitat needed by desert tortoises and bighorn sheep.

Wildlife and sensitive habitats need to be protected, said Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the group.

Tortoises, Sheep A Concern

Land just north of the Johnson Valley OHV area contains habitat for threatened desert tortoises, she said. The reptiles already lost habitat to the 150,000-acre expansion of the Army's National Training Center at Fort Irwin, near Barstow.

Anderson said the relocation of about 700 tortoises from the Fort Irwin expansion area put the animals in jeopardy, and coyotes killed about two dozen.

Land in the Marines' eastern expansion area is an important corridor between wilderness areas for desert bighorn sheep, Anderson said. The animal is not listed as threatened or endangered but its numbers are declining, she said.

"We hope it never gets listed," she said.

San Bernardino County Supervisor Brad Mitzelfelt, a former Marine who represents the area east of the combat center, said perhaps the Marines should consider taking some wilderness areas already damaged by military

activity. He said he would like to see Johnson Valley saved for off-roaders.

"The Marines need their room to train and test their modern weapon systems. The challenge is to do it in a way that doesn't overly impact other desert users," Mitzelfelt said.

Off-roading is important to many residents and to the desert economy, he said.

"There is a lot discussion and study that needs to take place," he said.

The BLM and Marine Corps plan to hold public meetings on the expansion Oct. 23 and 24, although the times and locations haven't been selected. Details can be viewed at www.blm.gov/ca.

Reach David Danelski at 951-368-9471 or ddanelski@PE.com
