

# Marines running into opposition on expanding Twentynine Palms

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RIVERSIDE – 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 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, about 175 miles northeast of San Diego.

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 and bighorn sheep.

Motorcycle enthusiasts and environmentalists cited 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. The proposal will be the subject of detailed environmental study and will require approval from Congress and the president, a process expected to take three to five years, said Mickey Quillman, resources chief for the Bureau of Land Management'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.

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

Environmentalists and off-roaders are concerned 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.

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