

CALIFORNIA DESERT: Military's tortoise relocation plan in jeopardy



Desert tortoises are listed as threatened with extinction.

By DAVID DANIELSKI / STAFF WRITER
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The Marines were gearing up to move the reptiles to Bureau of Land Management habitat areas near Barstow to protect them from live-fire exercises

The military has scrapped plans to move more than 1,400 protected desert tortoises from an expansion area at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms to BLM-managed habitat land this spring.

The Marines were gearing up to move the reptiles to Bureau of Land Management habitat territory near Barstow, so that the 88,000-acre Johnson Valley expansion area could be used this summer for live ammunition training.

A base spokesman said in an email Wednesday, March 16, that he is still trying to determine how the decision will affect the training plans.

The plan called for the tortoises to be moved as early as this month. To reduce stress on the animals, they were to be flown by helicopter to the Ord-Rodman Critical Habitat Unit, an area managed by the BLM southeast of Barstow as early as this month. But the manager of the BLM's Barstow Field Office, and Marines both sent emails Wednesday confirming that the move won't be this spring.

The emails did not explain why the move was canceled.

But the postponement comes a week after environmentalists with the Center for Biological Diversity filed a legal challenge to the planned move. And it comes a day after a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service official said the agency had not yet approved a required relocation plan.

Meanwhile, time was running out to get the tortoises moved before the military exercises.

Marine Corps officials had said they wanted to move the desert tortoises, which are listed as threatened with extinction, before the weather gets too hot, putting the animals in severe stress.