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Base taking closer look at Johnson Valley property

By Jimmy Biggerstaff / Hi-Desert Star

MCAGCC — The Department of the Navy has submitted an application to the Bureau of Land Management to withdraw from public use 421,270 acres of land that border Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, including land in the Johnson Valley area.

The Marine Corps announced in May last year that the Secretary of Defense authorized a study that could lead to land acquisition near the base.

The public acreage in the study area borders the base on its eastern, southern and western areas.

Base officials say the withdrawal request gives the Marine Corps the opportunity to carefully study these areas as alternatives for meeting training requirements.

The BLM will publish a notice of intent for the withdrawal request, which will trigger a public-comment period.

While forming an environmental impact statement, the Marine Corps and BLM say they will work with off-road vehicle, recreation and business communities to manage continued public access to the areas under study for potential acquisition.

Base officials expect the Department of the Navy to issue a notice of intent to begin the environmental impact study in late October or early November, with a public scoping meeting to be held in early December.

At the meetings, officials say they will share with the public reasonable alternatives, including one alternative to take no action at all.

Solar and wind power enterprises have also expressed their interest in acquiring government land in this area for solar- and wind-power generation.

Off-roaders urge base to look east

Ray Pessa is past president of the Friends of Giant Rock, a non-profit organization that formed a few years ago, "To address issues of concern to off-roaders and keep riding areas open," among other stated goals.

Pessa is also working with the newly formed Partnership For Johnson Valley, which seeks to keep an approved off-road riding area bordering the base from being annexed for military use.

Johnson Valley is the site of the largest open access riding area in the country.

The partnership has met with base officials to inform the leadership about public land use and encourage the government to look to the east of the base for its expansion plans, not into Johnson Valley.

In addition to off-roaders, Pessa pointed out that government land bordering the base hosts hikers, campers, rock hounds, scouting organizations and rocket clubs.

Pessa said the organizations he represents are in "full support of Marines getting best training they can possibly get."

He further stated the groups he is associated with would like for the government to "take a good, hard look to the east" to fulfill its training needs.

Twentynine Palms called best site

The Marine base currently covers 932 square miles of land north of Twentynine Palms and south of Interstate 40 in the southwest Mojave Desert. If the Marines were to acquire all of the proposed 658 square miles, it would increase the size of the training grounds by more than 70 percent.

The Marines have stated previously that any additional land area added to existing base real estate would be primarily used as buffer zones, not for live fire or maneuvering.

In a fact sheet published last year, the Marine Corps said it conducted a lengthy, nationwide search for additional training areas in Virginia, North Carolina, the Southeast and the Southwest, concluding only the Twentynine Palms facility met its requirements.

Earlier this year, the Marine Corps announced plans for building projects and facilities upgrades totaling more than \$271 million dollars for the Twentynine Palms base and the intent to station an additional 1,700 Marines here.

The planned plus-up is part of a proposal to increase the active-duty population of the Marine Corps from 175,000 to 202,000.

Brig. Gen. C.M. Gurganus, commander of the combat center, wrote in a letter to the community on Monday that the proposed land acquisition has a single purpose: To train Marines as they fight.

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