



**Land Acquisition and Airspace Establishment Project
Project Overview Paper — Issue 12 — June 2020
Marine Air Ground Task Force Training Command
Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center
Twentynine Palms, CA**



Background- Purpose and Need

The Marine Corps is the Nation's expeditionary force. Marines must train as they fight in order to be successful in deploying as a force in readiness anywhere in the world. Realistic training is essential to give Marines the best skills and tools to successfully meet their mission in combat and return safely home. Lessons learned in combat over previous decades, improved ranges of new weapons systems and equipment, increased capabilities of the Nation's potential adversaries, and anticipation of future military needs all informed determination of modernized training requirements. In 2001, Marine Corps doctrine identified the scalable Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF), known as a Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) as the Marine Corps primary contingency task force for the future. Based on this concept, the Marine Requirements Oversight Council (MROC) developed specific training requirements based on this concept in order to prepare Marines for what they will encounter in combat operations in 2006. These training requirements specified the need for enough land and airspace to accommodate three battalions simultaneously maneuvering in close coordination using combined-arms (i.e., air/ground), live fire for a 48-72 hour training period; to train a MEB in the same way that it would operate in combat.

Adequate training land and airspace to achieve these requirements did not exist at any installation in the country. As a result, the Marine Corps studied alternatives for land acquisition and accompanying Special Use Airspace (SUA) that could support these requirements. A Marine Corps study conducted by the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) analyzed MROC training requirements for scalable MAGTFs and assessed three regions of the country for their capability to support said training. It found the Southwest most suitable, but it showed that achieving the required sustained, combined-arms live-fire maneuver training capability, without distributed operations (i.e., spread over multiple bases) and representational forces, could only be achieved by expanding the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center (MCAGCC), Twentynine Palms, CA.

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Project Alternatives and the NEPA Process

MCAGCC, along with the Marine Corps Training and Education Command (TECOM), studied the MROC guidance in great depth to determine that lands studied could truly support the scalable MAGTF training requirements. As noted, the Marine Corps studied areas east, west, north and south of the base for their training suitability. Areas to the base's north were determined to be unsuitable due to terrain, infrastructure and lack of training value.

An application for withdrawal of public lands for military training was submitted to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to study areas adjacent to MCAGCC on the east, west and south of the base, approximately 420,000 acres of federal and non-federal land. BLM issued a segregation notice on September 15, 2008, to reserve the federal public lands from competing future claims while the Department of the Navy (DoN) completed the NEPA process. The BLM and the Marine Corps held public meetings on the withdrawal application in October 2008 and worked with stakeholders to allow uses such as recreation to continue during the study period.

The NEPA process required the Marine Corps to study reasonable alternatives for meeting its requirements, and to assess the impacts of the proposed alternatives on natural and socio-economic resources within those study areas. Five alternatives for meeting training requirements, and a No Action Alternative, were submitted to the public for review and comment during the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) scoping period. Three public scoping meetings were held in the first week of December 2008 and nearly 20,000 public comments were received on the proposed alternatives and issues to be studied during the EIS scoping and BLM comment periods.

After analyzing these comments, aligning the study areas more closely with terrain features, eliminating lands with minimal training value, and reducing the number of occupied affected private parcels, the DoN sent a notice to BLM relinquishing the Marine Corps interest in some of the segregated lands. As a result, approximately 60,000 acres were removed from the EIS study areas to the east, south and west of MCAGCC. About 360,000 total acres remained in the areas that were studied in the EIS.

In addition to the refinements in each of the five alternatives presented to the public during scoping resulting from public comments and further study, a sixth alternative was developed in response to public comments that accommodated public access to some of the lands in the west study area when Marines were not using the area for MEB training.

Set out below are maps and basic descriptions of the three most viable alternatives that were studied in the EIS, a fourth map shows the no action alternative that would not meet MEB level

requirements. These alternatives were developed in response to how they met Critical Training Requirements for scalable MAGTF, sustained, combined-arms live-fire maneuver training and other evaluation criteria. The Critical Training Requirements were identified as:

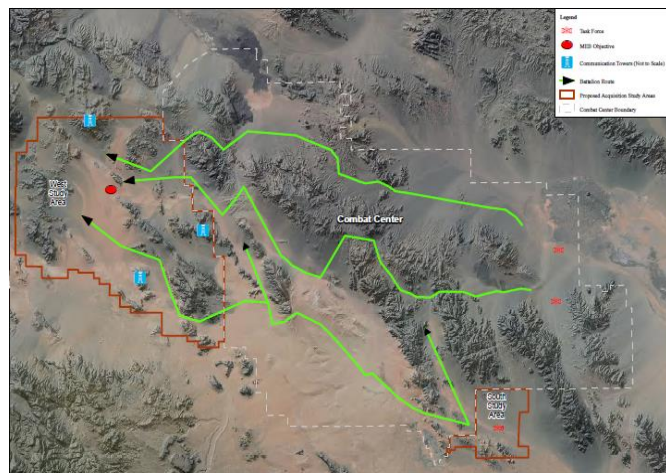
- Three Battalion Task Forces abreast converging onto a MEB objective
- 48-72 hours of continuous offensive operations toward the MEB objective
- Integrated air and ground live fires with optimized freedom of action (within reasonable constraints)

The other evaluation criteria were that the land and airspace would allow for:

- Employment of current/future weapons systems and munitions
- Employment of tactical communications/logistics over extended distances
- Contiguousness with current MCAGCC
- Avoiding parks, critical habitat, wildlife refuges and wilderness areas
- 1000 meter buffer between live-fire areas and the base boundary

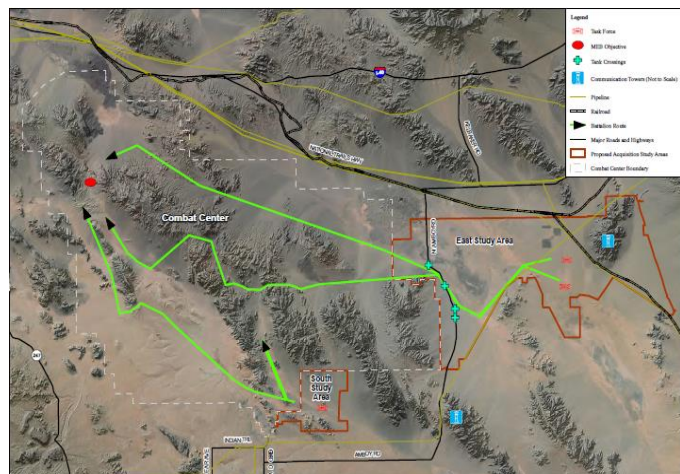
Land Alternative 1 (West/South)
201,657 acres
180,353 acres west/21,304 acres south

- Maneuver would start from the east on the current MCAGCC base and the south study area, and the MEB battalions would converge on an objective in the west study area. This alternative would be the best from an operational standpoint



Land Alternative 3 (South/East)
198,580 acres
21,304 acres south/177,276 acres east

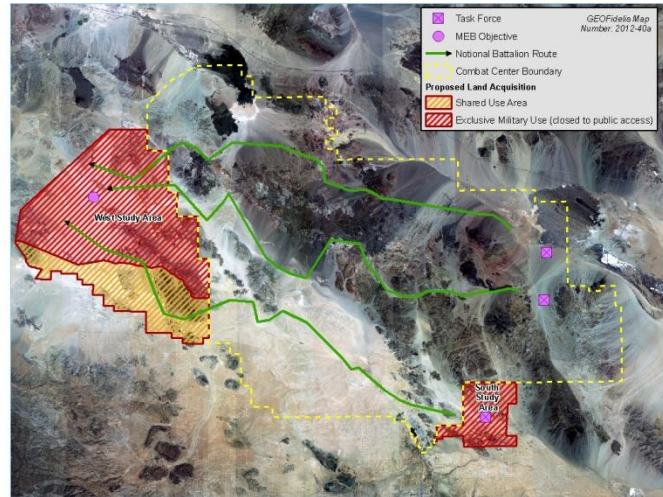
- Maneuver would start from the south and east study areas and the MEB battalions would converge on an objective within the current MCAGCC base in the northwest.
- This alternative was preferred by recreationists, as it would have the least impact on lands traditionally used for recreation



**Land Alternative 6 (West/South)
Preferred Alternative—Selected in ROD
167,971 acres**

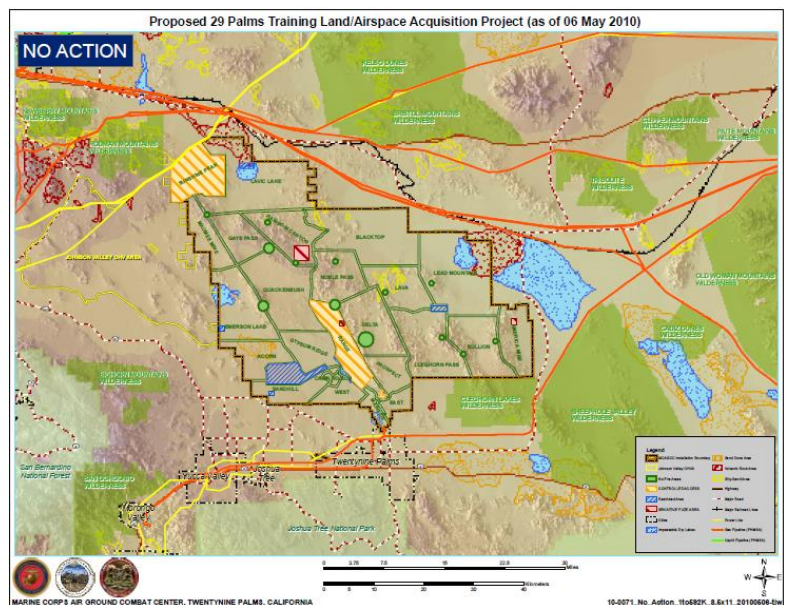
146,667 acres west/21,304 acres south

- Maneuver would start from the east on the current MCAGCC base and the south study area, and the MEB battalions would converge on an objective in the west study area.
- No dud-producing ordnance use in a 43,049 acre Shared Use Area in the south of the west study area
- Shared Use Area open 10 months of the year for public use when MEB training not required.
- Under written agreement with USMC, BLM would implement the management and control of the Shared Use Area for recreation uses.
- This alternative was the optimal alternative when taking into account both operational and environmental impact together.



**No Action Alternative Land
No New Land**

- The No Action Alternative would not meet the sustained, combined-arms, live-fire and maneuver MEB training requirement. Continued support of combined-arms, live-fire and maneuver training would occur for smaller units.



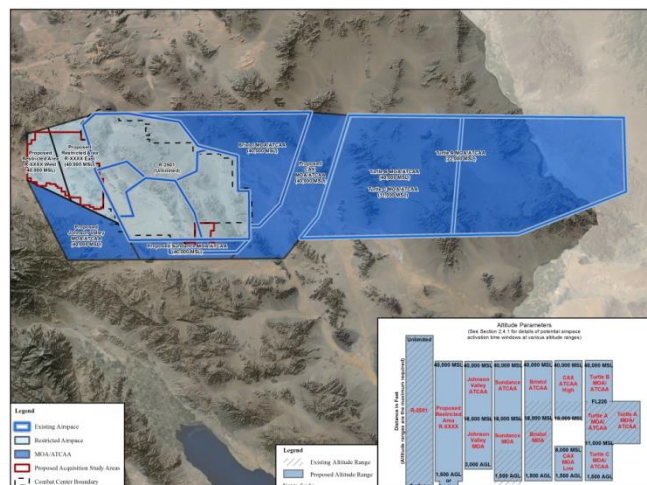
Acquiring additional airspace is also necessary to support sustained, combined-arms live-fire maneuver MEB training. Because of similar geographic footprints among the alternatives studied for potential land acquisition, there were originally only three proposed SUA establishment and modification alternatives - one for Alternatives 1, 4, 5 and 6; one for Alternative 2; and one for Alternative 3. They are illustrated in the graphics that follow. The DoN requested to establish additional and modify existing SUA to support the MEB training requirements. The three originally analyzed SUA proposals are set out below (airspace block elevations depicted in the lower right hand corner of the maps are also available in airspace documents on the project website). The types of airspace used for military training at MCAGCC during the time were:

- ◆ **Restricted Area (RA):** A Restricted Area is used to contain the effects of ground-based and airborne weapons systems to ensure public safety. MCAGCC releases RA for use by all aircraft in the National Airspace System when not needed for military training. Restricted Area starts at ground level above the installation footprint, and at 1,500 feet above ground level over non-DoD controlled land, going up to a potentially unlimited ceiling.
- ◆ **Military Operations Area (MOA):** A military operations area is airspace designated outside of Class A airspace (18,000 – 60,000 feet) to separate or segregate certain nonhazardous military activities from Instrument Flight Rule (IFR) traffic and to identify for Visual Flight Rule (VFR) traffic where these activities are conducted.
- ◆ **Air Traffic Control Assigned Airspace (ATCAA):** Air Traffic Control Assigned Airspace (ATCAA), which normally overlays a MOA (at altitudes above 18,000 feet), is like a MOA in that it allows non-military aircraft to be vectored through at the discretion of the local air traffic control authority.

Proposed Special Use Airspace under Land Acquisition Alternatives 1, 4, 5 and 6

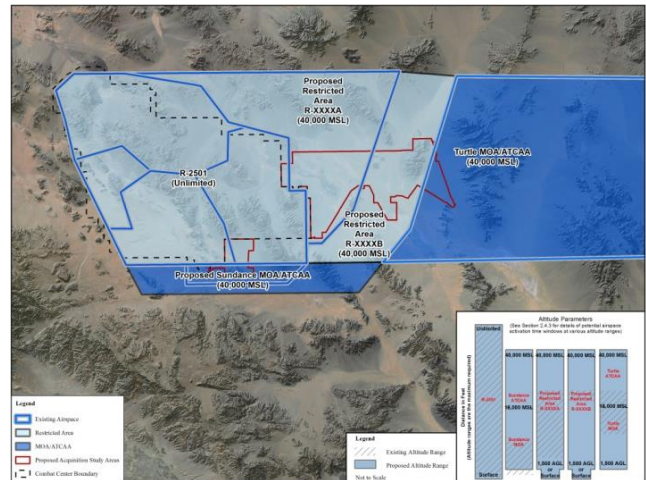
Alternative 6 is the Preferred Alternative—Selected in the ROD

- Would add Western RA to west.
- Would add Western MOA/ATCAA.
- Would add Combined Arms Exercise MOA/ATCAA to east.
- Would expand Sundance MOA/ATCAA to the south, east and west.
- Would add vertically to Sundance, Turtle and Bristol MOAs/ATCAAs.



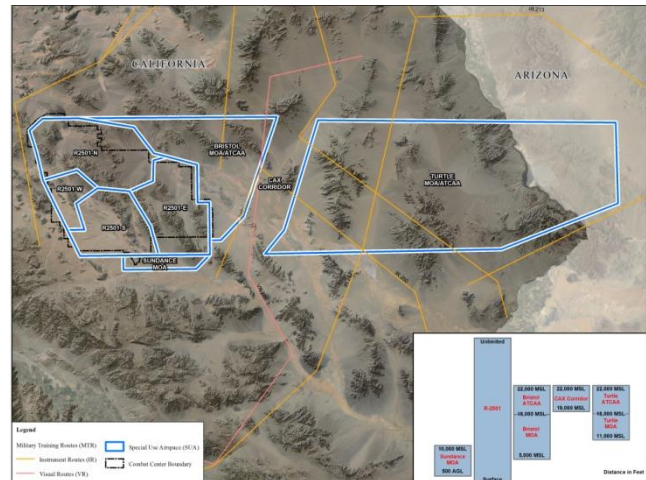
Proposed Special Use Airspace under Land Acquisition Alternative 3

- Would convert Bristol MOA/ATCAA into Bristol RA.
- Would add Combined Arms Exercise RA between currently authorized Bristol MOA/ATCAA and Turtle MOA/ATCAA.
- Would expand Sundance MOA/ATCAA to the south, east and west.
- Would add vertically to Sundance, and Turtle MOAs/ATCAAs.



No Action Alternative (Current Base)

- No New or Modified Airspace



NEPA Process—Public Involvement

The Department of the Navy published its Notice of Intent to prepare an EIS in October 2008 and held three public meetings in December 2008 to inform the public of the requirements. Nearly 20,000 public comments were received on the proposed project and five alternatives (and a No Action Alternative) and on substantive issues for study in the EIS.

The Department of the Navy and the Marine Corps analyzed these comments to develop a range of reasonable alternatives for meeting Marine Corps MEB training requirements. These comments contributed to the refinement of the five alternatives presented to the public during scoping and to the development of a sixth alternative that would accommodate east-to-west maneuvers as well as shared public access to some of the lands in the West Study Area when the area would not be in use for MEB training. This range of reasonable alternatives, and a No Action Alternative, were studied in preparation of a Draft EIS that was released on February 25, 2011. Three public comment meetings were held in the region and over 650 people attended the meetings held in Joshua Tree, Ontario, and Victorville. Nearly 22,000 public comments were received on the Draft EIS and were considered and evaluated in preparation of the Final EIS.

The DoN prepared and released the Final EIS that evaluated the environmental impacts associated with the proposed alternatives for land acquisition and Special Use Airspace establishment and modification, and proposed appropriate mitigation for unavoidable impacts on July 27, 2012. The BLM and FAA were cooperating agencies in producing the EIS. Other agencies and a broad range of interested stakeholders for the proposed project participated in various stages of the Draft and Final EIS preparation, including providing scoping comments on the alternatives and issues to be studied. Overall, more than 42,000 public comments were received throughout the EIS process, including nearly 1,000 on the Final EIS itself.

The Marine Corps and MCAGCC are committed to cultural and natural resource protection, environmental stewardship, and being a “good neighbor” to the community; these values were taken into account when evaluating the land alternatives. The data from the EIS and its public comments enabled the Department of the Navy and the Marine Corps to make the best decision to meet Marine Corps MEB training requirements, in balance with environmental, cultural and socioeconomic considerations.

Making a Decision

The NEPA process led the Department of the Navy to a decision based on environmental impacts evaluated in the EIS, costs, and mission training requirements. The Final EIS, in accordance with Council on Environmental Quality regulations, included appropriate mitigation measures not already included as part of the alternatives or yet identified in the Draft EIS and further mitigation was devised after review of public comments on the Final EIS and in consultation with BLM.

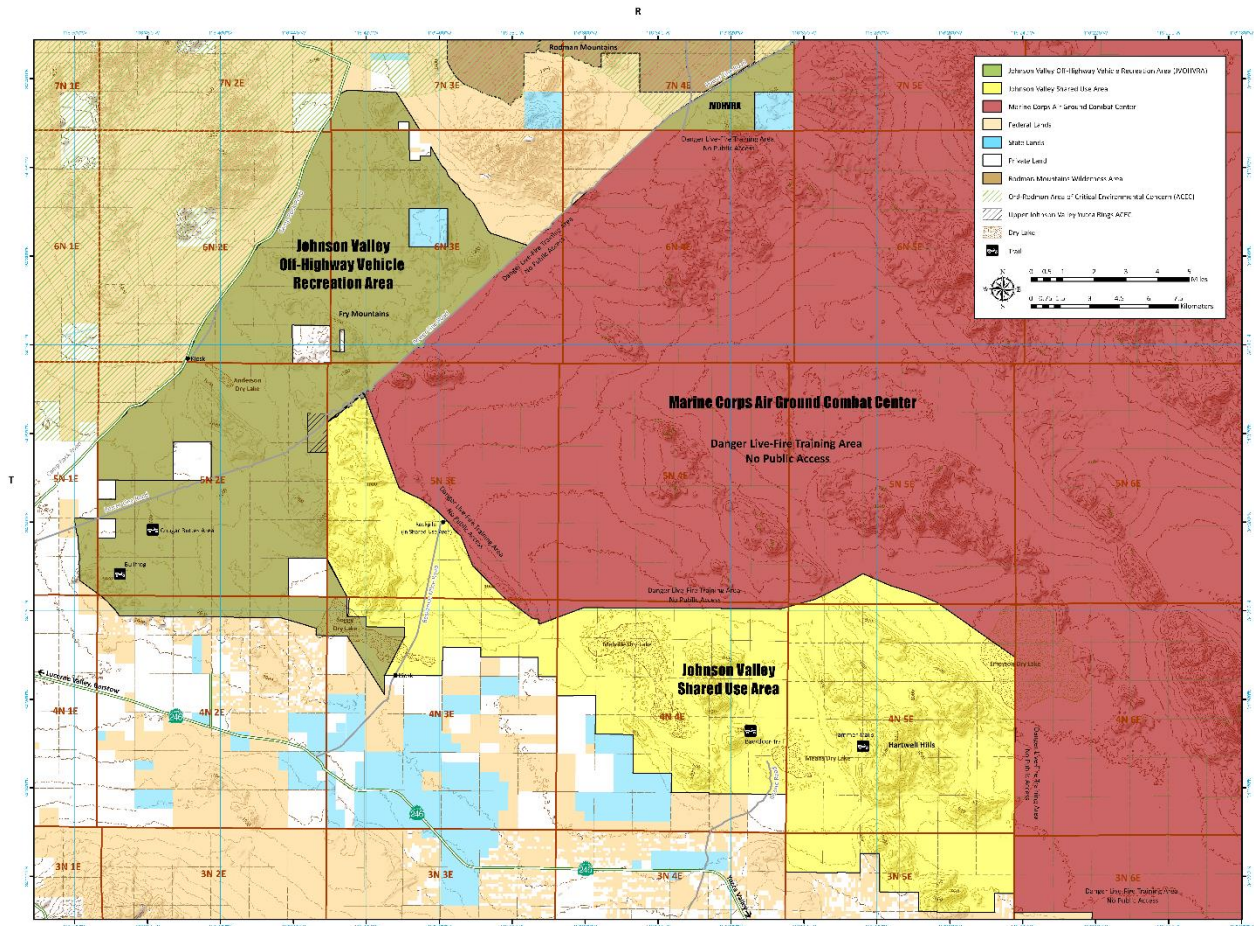
Alternative 6 was selected as the Preferred Alternative in the Draft EIS, with certain provisions that were slightly altered from the Final EIS. Alternative 6, developed in response to public comments to preserve public access to important off-highway recreation areas was not the best alternative from a training perspective, or the best from an environmental perspective. It was the preferred alternative because it was the optimal alternative considering operational and environmental impact factors together.

After evaluation of public comments on the Final EIS, the DoN made its decision and published its ROD on February 15, 2013. The ROD was published in the Federal Register and local newspapers. Alternative 6 was chosen as the Selected Alternative that was presented to Congress for approval.

FY2014 National Defense Authorization Act

Following the ROD, in the spring of 2013, the DoN submitted a completed application to Congress to withdraw public lands in order to support Marine Corps training requirements. The proposal was received, slightly modified, and signed into law by Congress and the President via the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2014 in December of 2013. The legislation modified the EIS Selected Alternative 6 by adjusting the EMUA boundary - slightly increasing the size of the Shared Use Area and decreasing the size of the EMUA. As well, the legislation designated approximately 43,000 acres of BLM land to the west as the Johnson Valley Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation Area, providing federal protection to the area for ongoing recreation and off-roading. The following map illustrates the finalized boundaries as a result of the FY2014 NDAA, slightly modified from the Selected Alternative of the ROD.

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The Congressional alternative allows the Marine Corps to meet training requirements while preserving land for recreational use

The Congressional decision for these land use changes necessitated the purchase of non-federal lands that were within the acquisition area. All private or state lands within the plan area have been evaluated for fair market value and are already acquired or in negotiations.

The legislation also mandated the establishment of the Resource Management Group (RMG), for the cooperative management of the Shared Use Area. The RMG was activated via charter in June 2014, and is a collaborative effort between the MCAGCC and BLM. Other responsibilities of the RMG include implementing a comprehensive Public Outreach Plan to educate the public on land use changes, solicit input from stakeholders, advise the Secretaries of Navy and Interior as to issues associated with these multiple uses, and to meet at least once per year.

Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement

The expansion at MCAGCC resulted in the preservation of approximately 15,000 acres of habitat for threatened and/or endangered species within the newly acquired areas, as well as neighboring Areas of Critical Environmental Concern. The desert tortoise population within this newly acquired training land had been identified for translocation to move them from areas where they could be impacted by military training activities to nearby areas in order to sustain their survivability in accordance with the FEIS.

In fall 2016, in response to various factors and new information available, two alternative translocation plans were developed and studied as part of a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, whereas an updated BO was released in January 2017. In February 2017, the Department of Navy selected Alternative 2 in their Record of Decision, the environmentally preferable alternative, in alignment with the BO. The translocation plan described in Alternative 2 was developed using internal USFWS guidance with a focus on augmenting depleted tortoise populations.

In April 2017, 929 desert tortoises were translocated in accordance with the Final SEIS. Specially trained Biologists moved the desert tortoise to recipient sites located both within protected areas on DoD lands and BLM lands near the Combat Center. In October of 2017, biologists from the Combat Center moved the remainder of the tortoises, totaling 114.



The Marine Corps is committed to protecting resident desert tortoises, adhering to the various conservation measures outlined in the ROD, as well as implementing a multi-faceted program of education, contributions to the scientific community, and complex ecosystem management intended to support recovery

of the species. The Environmental Affairs division conducts surveys and perform health assessments on the tortoise population and manages a long-term program to protect hatchlings and juveniles at the installation's Tortoise Research and Captive Rearing Site (TRACRS) until they grow resilient enough to endure the harsh physical environment, and resist predators of the desert. In its first nine years, TRACRS raised 475 tortoises from eggs, with an annual survivorship of 85-95%, compared to 40% or less in the wild.

Airspace Establishment

The 2014 NDAA authorized the withdrawal of public land in order to expand the Combat Center; however, establishment of associated airspace is still in progress. Modification of existing SUA and establishment of new SUA over and adjacent to the new training lands is a critical and integral component of the capability required to accommodate military aviation activities and employment of indirect fire weapons such as artillery and mortars in the course of sustained, combined-arms live-fire and maneuver training. The Marine Corps has been working closely with the FAA and stakeholders to develop airspace options that will support the training intended by the land expansion while considering and accommodating other users of the NAS.

The Marine Corps' submitted an initial Permanent SUA proposal in 2014, developed and modified throughout the 2012 EIS. This proposal was unable to be approved by the FAA, requiring further collaboration to identify a permanent solution that can accommodate goals that support both national security and other users of the NAS. In the interim of developing a revised proposal, the Marine Corps has been able to work with the FAA to achieve interim, temporary solutions that have supported smaller-scale training objectives. While the FAA did not approve temporary proposals for large-scale exercises in 2016, and 2018, the agency did grant Temporary SUA that supported a large-scale exercise in August 2017. The training conducted under Temporary SUA allowed the Marine Corps and the FAA to gather valuable additional data and lessons learned to incorporate into future proposals. In 2018, the FAA established a Controlled Firing Area (CFA) that supports smaller scale, live-fire, year-round training in the new range areas acquired in the land expansion. The CFA allows the Marine Corps to engage in live-fire training in expansion areas, without affecting other users of the NAS, as training is paused when non-participating aircraft enters the area. The CFA is scheduled to expire in August 2020. The Marine Corps submitted a revised Permanent SUA proposal to the FAA in August 2018, and is currently preparing an Environmental Assessment that analyzes the potential effects of the proposed airspace establishment that will support the FAA's decision making process.

Conclusion

The training conducted at the Combat Center is a cornerstone to a training regimen that best prepares our nation's warfighters to defend our nation, its allies and vital interests. The land expansion and temporary airspace solutions have afforded training opportunities that have allowed Marines and sailors to practice long-range raids, casualty evacuations, live-fire events, defensive operations, close air support and simulated combat operations in a realistic environment.

The first exercise utilizing newly acquired lands and the Shared Use Area for combined-arms, live-fire and maneuver training occurred in August 2016. Since then, the Marine Corps has utilized expansion areas to support vital military training that cannot be undertaken at any other Marine Corps training installation in the nation. The Shared Use Area was successfully used to accommodate large-scale military training activities in August 2016 and August 2017, and is planned for use in fall of 2020.

Requisite permanent SUA establishment remains a priority, with the Marine Corps working diligently with the FAA and stakeholders to establish airspace that can support the full scope of exercise capability intended by the expansion while also accommodating other users of the NAS.



The Marine Corps and the Department of the Navy remain committed to working with stakeholders to allow appropriate, continuing public use of public lands, and to notify the public well in advance of training to allow appropriate planning for public use of the Shared Use Area. In August 2018, August 2019, and April 2019, the Marine Corps honored the spirit and intended purpose of the Shared Use Area by opting to keep the area open to the public when training scope revisions did not require its use. The Resource Management Group continues to announce future dates for military training in the Shared Use Area to the public 12-18 months in advance and upholding “good neighbor” practices in collaborating with the BLM, local communities, off-highway vehicle and other recreationists, airspace stakeholders, and

conservation organizations to implement the land acquisition and airspace establishment project successfully.