

THE WEST

Training Marines While Preserving The Environment



For nearly 150 years, the Marine Corps primarily launched forces from our Eastern seaboard to fight our nation's battles. That all changed during World War II as the Corps expanded in size and needed places to train as it prepared for amphibious operations in the Pacific. Camp Pendleton was established and rapidly followed by others throughout California and Arizona until there were eight bases, including the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center, 29 Palms (MCAGCC), our service-level training facility at the center of this southwest regional "complex." The Marines came to prepare for war, but they were joined by many others attracted by the magnificent climate, the varied terrain and the opportunity of the West.

The Corps established and sized its installations based upon the requirements of the national military strategy, USMC doctrine, the reach of weapons systems, the aircraft airspace requirements and troop movement rates, and public welfare.

Marines lived and trained for whatever crises our government determined needed a force in readiness. Several developments have combined to shrink the effectiveness of our installations and ranges to meet this training requirement. (1) The capabilities of the Marine Corps improved and doctrine changed. We moved faster and our weapons shot further than when we established these training areas. (2) Our civilian neighbors continued to build closer and closer to our borders making it harder for commanders to balance their responsibilities to train those young Americans who volunteered to serve as Marines and be good neighbors. (3) Finally, environmental regulations, passed for all the right reasons, created limits on the location, duration and timing of essential training to preserve critical habitat and species. These species often found that the only suitable habitat remaining was on military installations because of unregulated growth in the private sector. Initially the Corps found itself challenged by environmentalists and regulators, until we each recognized our common goals and the wisdom of working together for resource management and environmental stewardship.

In the early 90's, the Corps began to recognize that our requirement for training space outstripped our capacity. At the same time we began to identify a requirement for brigade-sized (MEB) training. To determine how best to meet this requirement, the Marine Corps requested the Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) to assess

areas throughout the United States for suitability to support MEB training. The CNA study determined that the Southwest was the most suitable, but that there was no single site that could meet USMC MEB training requirements. The study determined that the installation that came closest was MCAGCC, but it would need to expand if it were to be able meet these requirements. In 2006 The Marine Requirements Oversight Council approved the Universal Need Statement for a

training area and facility to conduct realistic training for all elements of MEB-level MAGTFs, which led to our current study at MCAGCC.

The process for acquiring public lands for military training is extensive and recognizes that other equities and stakeholders have interests in the use of the Nation's land and natural resources. Ultimately the final decision rests with our national leaders, informed by the public, to determine the best use for public lands. In this case, Congress would have final say over any further withdrawal of public lands for military training at MCAGCC.

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The Bureau of Land Management and Federal Aviation Administration will participate with us as cooperating agencies in developing our Environmental Impact Statement. We will also continue to work closely with other agencies to ensure that we fully comply with every aspect of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). In addition, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California

Department of Fish and Game will help the Marine Corps carry out its responsibilities to the American people. The Marine Corps and the Department of the Navy (DoN) are committed to cultural and natural resource protection, environmental stewardship and being a good neighbor to the community.

The NEPA process has been established to allow for transparency, to collect public comments, and to ensure that all stakeholders have a voice in the evaluation process. Issues and alternatives were released to the public for review and comment during a 90-day EIS scoping period and public scoping meetings were held on the first week of December 2008. As a result, nearly 10,000 public comments were received. BLM also held a comment period and public meetings after it published its Notice of proposed legislative land withdrawal on September 15, 2008.

The hard work now rests upon the Marine Corps, the Navy and our BLM/FAA partners to review these comments, finalize and study reasonable alternatives for meeting MEB training requirements and to assess the impacts of these alternatives on natural, cultural and socio-economic resources. As part of the EIS process, the Marine Corps is committed to studying ways to mitigate adverse environmental impacts.

The NEPA process will include public review of a Draft EIS in the Summer and Fall of 2010. Stakeholders, including public agencies, state, local and tribal governments, businesses, environmental and non-governmental organizations, recreational enthusiasts, developers and private individuals will participate in a transparent process to review and comment on the Draft, and eventually the Final, EIS. The DoN and the Marine Corps will carefully consider the input provided before reaching a final decision.

After finalizing the EIS, the DoN will consider the environmental impacts identified in the EIS and use the EIS as a tool in selecting the best alternative that satisfies Marine Corps MEB training requirements. This decision will be published as a Record of Decision (ROD). If the ROD seeks additional training land and airspace at MCAGCC, then the Marine Corps would work with the Department of the Interior on any public land withdrawal submission to Congress and with the FAA on any Special Use Airspace establishment.

Any acquired lands would be managed with the same outstanding environmental sensitivity that occurs on our current installations, which manage federally listed species through Integrated Natural Resources Management Plans developed and implemented in coordination with Federal and State resource agencies. Marine Corps management has provided significant benefit to the conservation and recovery of endangered and threatened species on USMC lands. In one example, at MCB Camp Pendleton, active management of the endangered least Bell's vireo and California least tern was key to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's proposal to down-list these two species from endangered to threatened status.

Species management programs at MCAGCC Twenty-nine Palms and Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Yuma have provided critical conservation benefit to desert tortoise and Sonoran pronghorn populations. Twenty-nine Palms constructed a Tortoise Research and Captive Rearing Site for the threatened desert tortoise in collaboration with researchers from UCLA. Since 2006, this program produced over 140 hatchlings in just its first two years of managed operations. MCAS Yuma has partnered with the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Arizona Department of Game and Fish, and Luke Air Force Base to establish and manage a Sonoran Pronghorn captive breeding

program that has produced 51 fawns in four years. This past year, 2008, saw the first release of 17 animals from captivity into the Barry M. Goldwater Range.

Our commitment to responsible, successful stewardship carries over to all aspects of our environmental programs and planning, including cultural resources preservation, recycling, hazardous materials and waste minimization, alternative fuels and energy use, greenhouse gas and NOX emissions reductions, energy and fuel conservation, and air and water quality improvement. In 2008, either MCI-West or one or more of our bases proudly won, among others, a White House Closing the Circle Award for alternative fuel use and fuel conservation, as well as Presidential Leadership and DOE Federal Energy Management Program awards for energy and water conservation.

Our Corps understands the value of environmental stewardship. Marines have been sent to every clime and place and most of us have personally witnessed the impact of environmental degradation made possible by rapacious governments and irresponsible individuals in far off countries. We have seen the destruction of the oilfields in Kuwait, and the effect of generations of human impact

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on the natural resources of the Middle East. We have seen the destruction of tropical forests and what happens when governments put personal gain ahead of their stewardship responsibilities, thus dooming future generations of its citizens and the natural and biological resources of their land. We have returned to the United States fully appreciative of the natural beauty of this great land and aware that our resources are precious and easily lost.

We remain committed to being a force in readiness when our nation calls on us, and that does require sufficient land and airspace to "train as we fight." However, we also know that our responsibilities go well beyond defense of our national interests and that we hold Marine Corps installations in stewardship to the American people. We are firmly committed to that stewardship and, most importantly, we understand that a country worth defending is a country worth preserving. ♡

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