



*P.O. Box 3694 Landers, CA 92285 [www.hvccsite.org](http://www.hvccsite.org)*

To:  
Naval Facilities Engineering Command, Southwest  
ATTN: 29Palms EIS Project Manager  
1220 Pacific Highway  
San Diego, CA 92132-5190

May 26, 2011

Re: 29Palms Base expansion Draft Environmental Impact Statement

Dear Sir:

The Homestead Valley Community Council (HVCC) is an organization made up of representatives from the community associations in Landers, Johnson Valley, Yucca Mesa and Flamingo Heights. These unincorporated communities are located along Hwy 247 in an area mapped in the San Bernardino County General Plan as the Homestead Valley.

The HVCC brings issues we have in common to local, county, state and federal officials. We undertake projects of benefit to citizens of the communities, and to the Marine Corps.

Our monthly meetings are regularly attended by representatives of the Fire Department, County Code Enforcement, and the Third Supervisorial District, as well as residents who bring us issues that need to be reported to any of these officials. The HVCC made a comment opposing the 29Palms Base expansion during the public scoping period.

See [www.hvccsite.org](http://www.hvccsite.org) for more information about the Council and the historic communities.

We know a lot of time and effort has been put into the DEIS, but we are highly disturbed by deficiencies in the document relating to studies of the effects of the proposed expansion of the 29Palms Base and the increase in training activities, and the lack of any mention of the Homestead Valley communities and their historic roots.

**The DEIS states that potential impacts from six action alternatives and the No-Action Alternative have been analyzed, including the impacts on cultural resources.**

The DEIS states that cultural resources would be managed in accordance with the provisions of federal laws and regulations as well as Marine Corps policy. The Programmatic Agreement (PA) Between the United States Marine Corps and the California State Historic Preservation Officer ... would be amended to include any lands acquired as a consequence of the proposed action alternative.

On Page 29 there is a Table showing Alternative 1, Cultural Resources, which states that less than significant impacts may result from weapons fire, MEB operations, group and individual traffic, battalion movements, aviation Weapons Danger Zone, and construction.

It also states that Special Conservation Measures and other measures would be implemented to avoid or reduce impacts to resources, and that there are no impacts anticipated from airspace establishment.

Similar judgements are made in this Table and further on in the document for the other Alternatives.

However, this analysis is stated to be made WITHIN the areas being studied for acquisition, where there are few if any residents.

This contradicts the public scoping issues (4.3.1.3) listed on page 532, which include:

- Decrease of revenue and employment and associated tax revenue from tourism recreational and film industries**
- Devaluation of surrounding private property.**
- Increased costs to federal, state and local jurisdictions for increased law enforcement.**

**All of these impacts would occur OUTSIDE the proposed expansion areas, and have major consequences to the Homestead Valley communities.**

This contradiction in the DEIS must be corrected. The Homestead Valley communities are close neighbors to the Base and to the westward expansion area, and therefore must be included by name in all analyses, and in particular under Cultural Resources. It must also be stated that the DEIS did not do this.

These communities were founded under the Small Homestead Act of 1939, an Act of Congress in which the Federal Government, to spur growth and utilization of our desert lands, provided individuals with 5-acre parcels of land under the condition that they would build a residence on the property within two years of award. This plan to stimulate recreational use and settlement of the vast desert lands directly led to the settlement of the Homestead Valley.

**The National Historic Preservation Act, Section 106, establishes historic eligibility under various criteria including: Association with Historic Events. The Homestead Valley fulfills that criterion.**

Because of the history of the four homestead communities, linking their founding to the Small Homestead Act, they have historic eligibility status since they were created under that historic Act (as is the case with the original Homestead Act of 1862), and should be included in the DEIS for study as cultural resources.

"The stories of these intrepid homesteaders, their isolated cabins, their adjustments to the wild land and its wildlife, are preserved today in old newspapers, journals and tall and short tales.

"Wild as the life was, they still determined that a few 20th century amenities were necessary. These four communities grew,

and raised the funds, broke the grounds and established their community centers. They worked with the county to install road signs; they brought in water, electric, telephone and postal service.

"Today they work together under the banner of the HVCC to insure that county, state and federal officials are aware of their rural needs in the sprawling clamor of 21st century California –from the HVCC Brochure, "4 high desert settlements on a historic trail..."

The westward expansion area includes Means Dry Lake, site of the historic Means Well. This well was dug by workers from the Heart Bar Ranch which was active from the early 1900's till after World War II. Heart Bar grazed cattle herds all along Old Woman Springs Rd, a route now followed by Hwy 247. They also dug Ames Well and others now inside the Base boundaries.

Their history is part of the history of the Homestead Valley, and all relics of it should be recognized in the DEIS.

-These historic homestead communities have existed as long as the Base has existed. However, noise and shock effects have increased in recent times. The DEIS says training exercises under each Alternative are planned to increase both in intensity and duration. The DEIS must be changed to state that the escalation of noise and vibration is recognized outside the study area. It must be reported as having significant socio-economic and environmental justice impacts on the surrounding homestead communities, which must be considered as Cultural Resources.

-Very few people consider it desirable to move to a home that will feel the effects of hours of live fire air-ground combat. The DEIS must recognize that even the announcement of the proposed expansion has impacted property sales, and if approved will adversely impact property values.

-Rural inconveniences are outweighed by open spaces and rural quiet to those who choose to live in these historic places. The DEIS must state that expansion will make properties in the Homestead Valley less desirable, causing financial hardship, and possible desolation.

The DEIS must be changed to address all impacts on the Homestead Valley as historic cultural resources, survivals of pioneer days in California.

Under all Alternatives the document must state there will be significant impacts to these communities, and that the DEIS overlooked this. The preparers of the document were made aware during the scoping period that a large percentage of the property owners within the Homestead Valley use and love the Johnson Valley OHV area, not just as riders or racers, but as users of OHVs to get where they want to go to camp, rockhound, trail ride or simply experience the open desert.

The DEIS does not make it plain to the average reader the inadequacy of mitigation lands to replace OHV recreational areas removed from public access. There are not enough public lands in the California Desert Conservation Area to mitigate the proposed Base expansion. There certainly are no lands available in the vicinity of the Johnson Valley OHV area, contiguous to or accessible from the existing area.

Therefore there is no mitigation for the economic losses to the Homestead Valley (see below). There are no potential mitigation measures stated for Socio-economics, Cultural Resources and Environmental Justice in the Homestead Valley.

Therefore, because there is no discussion of how the issue of mitigation lands can be addressed, the document cannot meet NEPA requirements.

On Page 33, Table ES-3 states: Mitigation measures will be developed in consultation with SHPO, the Tribes and interested parties. In addition, the ICRMP would be modified and developed in consultation with SHPO and the Native American Tribes that have an interest in lands under the jurisdiction of the Marine Corps.

(To the reader feeling battered by an assault of initials, the fine print below the Table explains:

SHPO=State Historic Preservation Officer ICRMP=Integrated Cultural Resource Plan)

However, as the DEIS area does NOT include the Homestead Valley communities per se, it is not clear what mitigation measures, if any, will be considered for them.

Stating mitigation measures will be developed in the future leaves no basis for judgement as to whether any mitigation measures are possible at all.

Therefore, the DEIS must be changed to clarify and enumerate any mitigation measures, or state in words of one syllable, if you live next to us, you will be hurt.

Minimization continues throughout the Socio-economic section of the document. The DEIS estimates revenue lost due to reduction in OHV visits in the Lucerne Valley area, an historic agricultural settlement that is a close neighbor of the Homestead Valley; it also mentions the Town of Yucca Valley. They are described as “the nearest communities with any appreciable retail and traveler services presence (though limited) that can support the purchasing needs of people visiting Johnson Valley.” It is true that both have markets, fuel, restaurants and other services within a half-hour drive of the OHV area. But the DEIS is completely dismissing the presence of the commercial zone on Hwy 247 in Flamingo Heights that also enjoys a huge increase in business on the big weekends, and are even closer to the OHV area. These merchants and restaurants are very important to residents in the Homestead Valley. However, there is not enough local population to keep them in business. They rely heavily on travelers on Hwy 247.

What the DEIS does not report is that most grocery stores operate on a profit of 3 to 5 percent. Loss of 7 plus percent, as is stated for the Lucerne Valley Market and Hardware, almost guarantees closure of the business. The smaller businesses in the Homestead Valley also would be severely impacted. The document must be corrected to give the true picture of what the base expansion will do to these neighbors.

Johnson Valley, Landers, Flamingo Heights and Yucca Mesa are already significantly impacted by noise, vibration, air pollution and/or light pollution all around and above their heads. The proposed expansion of training exercises and Combat Center area will increase these very significant impacts. There is a large percentage of residents who are too old, and in financial circumstances too restricted, to move away from the stress of noise and vibration. They face the possibility of an extra burden of traveling further for food and fuel if the businesses along Hwy 247 fail due to loss of revenues from decreasing numbers of new residents and visitors.

-The DEIS compares loss of property tax from acquired lands to total county dollars received from taxes, rather than make the comparison with other rural desert communities' tax dollars. Therefore the reader is completely misled as to the true magnitude of the loss. Not only should the comparison be between rural desert communities, the preparers do not address what those lost dollars have been supporting, and how that loss will impact these communities (i.e. waste management, library, park, county services, etc.) The seemingly small number of tax dollars may just mean the difference between a facility remaining open or closed, or services being provided or not. The county of San Bernardino is already undergoing severe budget cuts, due to economic conditions that did not exist when these expansion plans were initiated. Therefore the DEIS fails to accurately portray and evaluate impacts, and must be corrected to reflect real-time conditions, which are not forecast to change very soon.

-The DEIS estimates creation of 90 new jobs, of which about 77 will be on base and 13 off base. The DEIS states lost merchant jobs and dollars from reduced recreational opportunities are not significant and will likely be made up by the new jobs created and more Marines moving in and out of 29 Palms.

As most of the new jobs, if not all, are likely to be located in the city of 29 Palms (the base headquarters) the preparers of this DEIS have cruelly marginalized the impact of lost dollars on more distant communities in the Homestead Valley and beyond. The death or near death of small but historic desert communities near the Johnson Valley OHV Area has not been given due consideration. The redistribution of jobs and incomes from one part of the desert to another part of the desert has not been adequately portrayed or addressed. Neither has the redistribution of sales tax revenue.

Also the Force Structure Review of 2010 includes in its significant force structure changes a 13% reduction in civilian employees. Where this reduction will occur, and how many employees at MCAGCC will be affected is not clear. The document must address this reduction and spell out the difference it makes between the Draft estimates and the Final estimates of new jobs.

At any rate, the DEIS fails to give a true picture of the very significant impacts on the job market in the Homestead Valley, and it must be corrected.

The DEIS does say that under the Marines' preferred Alternative 6, access to and use of approximately 56% of the Johnson Valley OHV Area would be lost, representing a significant impact. It does acknowledge that the resource is unique to the region, given its combination of vast open space, large variety of desert views and scenic vistas, and unique geologic formations. It does not emphasize the region is considered unique to the entire country, and draws visitors from all over the world. 44% of the Johnson Valley OHV Area would be available for public recreation for an unspecified and possibly variable 10 months per year (for the portion acquired as Restricted Public Access area), or all of the year (for the area not acquired, which is the farthest west). It does acknowledge that the displacement of recreational users to the remaining portion of the Johnson Valley OHV Area would result in significant impacts to recreational resources in the west study area.

This brings us to the impact on the community next to the westward expansion area, less than five miles outside the study area.

The unincorporated community of Johnson Valley lies directly south of what became the Johnson Valley OHV Area over 30 years ago. The Johnson Valley Improvement Association (JVIA) was founded 53 years ago for the benefit of the early homesteaders.

JVIA volunteers built, maintain and operate the Johnson Valley Community Center, which is the hub of social and educational activities in this isolated and widely scattered settlement. It also served as an emergency center after the 1992 earthquake. Three meals a day for over two weeks were served to all comers, and those who needed shelter found it there.

The DEIS does not specifically address impacts on the Johnson Valley community, although researchers for the document and other Marine representatives repeatedly visited during the scoping period. Several focus group meetings were held in the Johnson Valley Community Center building, overlooking the valley the Marines wish to close to public access. When the expansion plans were originally formed, the planners may not have known that citizens lived in Johnson Valley. But USMC representatives did come

and meet them. They listened closely to the citizens' comments, and took copious notes. But as was feared, the overwhelming impact of the proposed actions on Johnson Valley is not reflected in the DEIS. To a reader in another part of the US who may know nothing about the California high desert and its history, the impacts are rated as less than significant, and therefore the document is misleading and must be corrected.

The HVCC strongly supports JVIA (a member association) in its efforts to make the Marines understand what this Base expansion would do. Of major concern, the Johnson Valley Community Center is largely supported in all its activities by the breakfast it serves each Saturday (cooked and served by volunteers) to the "weekenders" who own property in Johnson Valley, and the OHV visitors from across the highway.

Page 557, Table 4.3-13 shows the estimated loss of 24.6% in direct expenditures in the area if the preferred Alternative 6 is chosen. This will be even greater for the Community Center during the two or more months the public would not be allowed access during training exercises. Those two months will be during Spring and Fall, avoiding the extremes of heat and cold the desert climate is noted for. These are also the months of largest attendance at the Saturday Breakfast. It is not unusual to serve 120+ guests on long weekends when the weather is good. It is not unusual to see that number dwindle to 40 in the high summertime.

Therefore the denial of public access to the remnant "shared use" area will inevitably reduce the numbers of guests at the Saturday Breakfast, as well as the number of potential property owners attracted to Johnson Valley. The loss of Saturday Breakfast revenues will inevitably jeopardize the future of the JVIA and of the Community Center.

Therefore, the DEIS must be corrected to make it very clear to even the most cursory of readers that the economy, and very existence of Johnson Valley, and indeed the viability of all the historic Homestead Valley communities, are threatened under all Alternatives except #3, due to the closure or partial denial of public access to the Johnson Valley OHV area. The noise and other effects of increased and intensified training exercises under Alternative #3 also threaten these communities. It must also state that these impacts were not properly presented in the draft document.

The HVCC also strongly urges an extension of the May 26 public comment period, as there are many citizens who are only now learning about the proposed Base expansion, and need more time to go into this enormous document in detail. There was also confusion as to the correct address to send comments. In order to preserve their good relations with their neighbors, the Marines should grant this extension.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jim Harvey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

James Harvey,  
President HVCC