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Chairman, “Save the Hammers” Subcommittee
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Testimony on HR 1676:
The “Johnson Valley National Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation Area Establishment Act”

House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation

Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Jeff Knoll and I am the Chairman of the “Save the Hammers” Subcommittee of the California Motorized Recreation Council (CMRC), a nonprofit association comprised of leaders from the largest off-highway vehicle (OHV) organizations in California. I am the Co-Founder of the annual “King of the Hammers” off-road desert-racing event held at the Johnson Valley OHV Recreation Area. I serve on the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) Desert Advisory Subcommittee regarding Special Recreation Permits in the California Desert District.

CMRC’s membership includes the Off-Road Business Association (ORBA), California Association of 4 Wheel Drive Clubs (Cal4Wheel), California Off-Highway Vehicle Association (CORVA), American Motorcyclists Association National (AMA), San Diego Off-Road Coalition (SDORC), American Sand Association (ASA), California Nevada Snow Mobile Association (CNSA), and AMA Districts 36 and 37 Off-Road. CMRC also joined forces with the Specialty Equipment Market Association (SEMA), Americans for Responsible Recreation Access (ARRA) and the Motorcycle Industry Council (MIC) to form the “Save Johnson Valley Coalition” dedicated to developing a solution that addresses the needs of the military along with the local and OHV communities. Together, the associations represent millions of OHV enthusiasts in California and across the nation.

I would like to thank Congressman Paul Cook and the Subcommittee for recognizing the need to develop a solution to meet the training objectives of the United States Marine Corps at the Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms while maintaining responsible recreation opportunities in the Johnson Valley OHV Recreation Area. As a former Marine Corps Colonel and long-time resident of Yucca Valley, Congressman Cook is uniquely qualified to identify this remedy.

Johnson Valley is the largest OHV recreation area in the United States, totaling nearly 189,000 acres. It is managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and was designated an OHV area under the 1980 Desert Conservation Plan. The open area is used year-round by OHV enthusiasts, stargazers, amateur geologists, photographers, the boy scouts, and the film industry. Johnson Valley offers a unique backcountry experience that attracts campers from around the world. The area is also home to numerous events that draw thousands of motorized recreation competitors and spectators to the area every year.

U.S. Marine Corps Need for Expanded Combat Training

In 2004, the Marine Corps identified the need to train a brigade-level expeditionary force of about 15,000 troops during two months a year. The mission would include integrated air/ground maneuver live-fire and 48-72 hours of continuous offensive operations by three battalion-sized task forces converging on a single objective.

The Marine Corps determined that the Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms would be the appropriate venue for the training exercises if its base perimeter could be expanded. Although Twentynine Palms is already the second largest military base in the United States and three-quarters the size of Rhode Island, the Marine Corps decided it was not large enough. In 2008, the Marine Corps embarked on a four-year environmental impact study which ended in February 2013 with a formal request to Congress to transfer 160,000 acres of the 189,000 acres Johnson Valley OHV Recreation Area to the Twentynine Palms base. While the Marine Corps offered to make 40,000 acres available for OHV activity, this would not be guaranteed since ordnance remains from live-fire exercises would eventually threaten the safety of OHV users and the public.

OHV and Local Community Needs

Ensuring land access for the Marine Corps should not exclude addressing the economic and recreational needs of the local community or OHV enthusiasts. It is therefore important to simultaneously identify the contributions and needs of all stakeholders.

For example, Johnson Valley hosts the annual “King of the Hammers” event – the largest off-road race held in the United States. The event was founded in 2007 with only 13 teams racing over a 35 mile course that included the desert, rock canyons, sand washes, and dry lake beds. Today the specialty built “ultra4” vehicles average \$150,000 to build and travel over 100 miles per hour while being able to traverse some of the most difficult terrain on the planet. The race now has more than 300 teams competing from around the globe before thousands of fans in person, via the Internet, and on national television. In 2012, the King of the Hammers attracted over 30,000 participants for ten days in February. The BLM estimates that over 50,000 people attended this year’s event. The event has received the highest rating possible by the BLM for the last four years, and has become a model for BLM special recreation permits.

I was a consultant to CMRC and ORBA in preparing the attached “Economic Impact of OHV Recreation at Johnson Valley” (March 2012). The study provides context for Johnson Valley’s importance for OHV activities. Highlights include:

- **Economic Impact:** BLM estimates \$71.5 million annually to the local economy and \$191.2 million to the national economy. If including travel expenses getting to Johnson Valley, the national estimate rises to \$261.5 million in commerce.
- **Visitor Days:** estimates range from 300,000 visitor days a year by BLM to 800,000 days by CORVA. There were 42 event days permitted by the BLM in 2010. For our study we have used the conservative visitor days estimates provided by the BLM.
- **OHV Access:** land area available for off-roading activities in the California desert has shrunk dramatically since the 1970s. Only around 2% of the California desert is open OHV area, and Johnson Valley represents approximately 50% of the available area. There are few suitable alternative sites if Johnson Valley is removed from the inventory with none that offer the experience of this unique location.

- Expanding Needs: OHV recreation is one of the fastest growing categories of outdoor activity in the U.S. Studies have shown a 108% increase between 1980 and 2000. During the same time period, available land area decreased by 48%.

Legislative Solution

This legislation grants federal status to the OHV area by creating the “Johnson Valley National Off-Highway Vehicle Recreation Area.” It would provide the Marine Corps with access to the land in order to fulfill the training mandate identified nearly 10 years ago. This would include up to 42 days a year for large-scale, live-fire field training by air/ground task forces. The public would be able to participate in identifying mutually-compatible times periods for the training exercises.

Small ammunition could be used but large dud-producing ordnance would be prohibited as this material could threaten the safety of the public threaten OHV users, and lead to closure of the OHV recreation area. The land would continue to be managed by the BLM.

Solution Addresses All Stakeholder Concerns

During the nearly five-year debate, the OHV community questioned the need for annexing the land, given the fact that the Marine Corps training requirements needed the land for less than two months a year. The legislation offered by Rep. Cook offers consensus between the Marines Corps training needs, continued growth of the local economy, which is supported by recreational activities, and sustained, motorized recreational access to the California Desert.

- The Marines Corps is offered access to more land than it has requested to meet its training needs which allows flexibility if their mission changes.
- Simultaneously, the land is preserved for OHV recreation and economic contributions to the local community.
- Continued BLM control means the Marines do not have to manage and secure the land on a yearly basis. Much of Twentynine Palms is already unsecured and experiences accidental incursions by the public on a regular basis.
- Ordnance restrictions will ensure public safety.
- The OHV community is guaranteed continued access to property set aside for their use as part of the 1980 Desert Conservation Plan one of the last opportunities in an already severely restricted California desert. The Marine Corps is relieved of budget demands for managing and securing hundreds of square miles of public land.

As the Chairman of the CMRC’s Save the Hammers Subcommittee and also authorized to speak on behalf of the “Save Johnson Valley Coalition,” we heartily endorse the legislative proposal put forth by Rep. Cook.

Thank you to Chairman Bishop, Ranking Member Grijalva, Congressman Cook and the Subcommittee members here today for the opportunity to support this important legislative solution. I would be pleased to answer any questions that members of the Subcommittee may have.

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