

Environmentalists force Park Service to back down Lawsuits compel reversal of decision to provide watering spots for deer

By KELLY DONOVAN

BARSTOW — The National Park Service is withdrawing its approval of a plan to establish artificial watering sources in the Mojave National Preserve, which had been the subject of a federal lawsuit by environmentalists.

The preserve's superintendent had authorized in January the conversion of four former ranchers' well systems into guzzlers for mule deer. guzzlers are man-made watering holes for wildlife.

In response, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility filed a lawsuit in March asking that the Park Service stop working on the conversions.

The lawsuit contends that the conversion plans should be subject to review under the National Environmental Policy Act, which requires federal agencies to evaluate the possible environmental effects of their projects.

Key environmental concerns surrounding guzzlers are the impacts to the desert tortoise, which is listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act.

Park Service research has shown that tortoises have drowned after getting stuck in guzzlers, and guzzlers are also faulted for attracting ravens, a major predator of the tortoise.

Mojave National Preserve Superintendent Mary Martin rescinded her approval of the guzzler plans in an April 5 letter to the California Department of Fish and Game.

"Upon further review of this matter, the National Park Service has determined that additional NEPA compliance is desirable before a decision is made," Martin wrote in the letter.

The letter states that the NEPA process will incorporate any necessary compliance under the Endangered Species Act and other relevant laws.

Hunting groups generally favor guzzlers — which provide water for large game animals — while environmental groups oppose them.

However, Daniel Patterson, desert ecologist at the Center for Biological Diversity, said Wednesday that his group isn't opposing hunting in the preserve.

"It's not an issue of hunting vs. no hunting," he said. "It's an issue of whether you're going to manage the place like a preserve or like a game farm."

As to whether the groups might dismiss their suit against the Park Service, Patterson said their legal team must first have discussions with the government's attorneys to determine the best way to proceed.

He said, though, the groups were pleased about the Park Service withdrawing the authorization and deciding go through the full NEPA process.

"We definitely support Mary Martin and her letter," he said. "We got what we wanted out of this."

The Mojave National Preserve encompasses more than 1.5 million acres east of Barstow, sandwiched between Interstate 40 and Interstate 15. The preserve staff's office is in Barstow.