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Feds refuse to list Imperial County dune beetle as endangered

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SAN DIEGO - Federal officials won't put a dune-dwelling beetle on the endangered species list.

An environmental group that petitioned to add the Andrews' dune scarab beetle to the Endangered Species Act failed to sufficiently back up its claims, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Friday.

The group argued that the beetle lives only in the 160,000-acre Algodones Dunes in Imperial County, where large areas are open to off-road vehicles that churn up the sand in which the beetles bury themselves.

"We're not saying we do or don't believe them," agency spokeswoman Jane Hendron said.

"In this case, they didn't provide substantial info to support the claims," she said.

The Center for Biological Diver-

sity, which filed the petition, was concerned about efforts by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to reopen another 50,000 acres of the dunes to off-road vehicles.

Those portions were closed six years ago to protect an endangered plant. In March, a federal judge struck down the proposal to reopen them.

The center is disappointed with the Fish and Wildlife ruling and may take the issue to court, said Daniel Patterson, a desert ecologist with the center.

However, Patterson also said he would be satisfied if there is an agreement by the land management bureau to keep the areas closed to off-roading.

"It's not just a big sandbox to play with your vehicles," he said.