
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

APRIL 11, 2006

Group seeks protection for lizard

DESERT: Off-road advocates argue such a move could lead to riding limits at Dumont Dunes.

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The Press-Enterprise

An environmental group on Monday filed a petition with the federal government seeking endangered or threatened status for a desert-dwelling lizard, saying off-roading in wind-sculpted dunes of remote San Bernardino County is leading to the reptile's demise.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service generally takes 90 days to decide if such petitions warrant further review, said Al Donner, an agency spokesman in Sacramento.

If that's the case, Donner said, it could take another few years to determine if the Mojave fringe-toed lizard should be protected under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Off-roaders were concerned that another protected species in the desert could lead to riding limits at Dumont Dunes, much like a threatened plant has done at the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area near the Mexican border.

"With the amount of closures in the last 10 to 15 years in the desert, we feel strongly that each additional closure needs to be done in a legal and proper way," said Fred Wiley, executive director for the Off-Road Business Association, which has an office in Temecula.

Each year, some 140,000 visitors go to the 10,500-acre Dumont Dunes, said Doran Sanchez, a spokesman for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which operates the dunes.

The petition for the seven-inch, black-flecked lizard is focused on a specific population of the reptile that lives around the Amargosa River, which meanders through Inyo and San Bernardino counties. The lizard also lives in other parts of Southern California and Arizona .

Daniel Patterson , desert ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, which submitted the petition, said the dunes are unique habitat islands and therefore typically harbor scores of rare and native wildlife.

"They're just being hammered by off-roading," he said. "We're hoping

to provide protection before they get closer to extinction."