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Group told insect not endangered

SCARAB BEETLE: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says there isn't enough evidence it is threatened.

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has turned down a request by an environmental group to consider listing the Andrews' dune scarab beetle under the Endangered Species Act.

The beetle lives in parts of the 160,000-acre Algodones Dunes in Imperial County . The Center for Biological Diversity, which filed the petition, is concerned that off-road vehicle use -- allowed on about half the area -- threatens the beetle.

But in its ruling, announced Friday, the Fish and Wildlife Service said the petitioners did not sufficiently back up their assertions.

"We're not saying we do or don't believe them," said Jane Hendron, an agency spokeswoman. "Do they or don't they provide substantial information to support the claims? In this case, they didn't provide substantial info to support the claims."

The petitioners did not provide ample proof that the beetle only

exists within the Algodones Dunes. There is evidence that the beetles live elsewhere, including Mexico, Hendron said.

Daniel Patterson, a desert ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said he was disappointed with the decision, and that the group is considering taking the issue to court.

The petition was launched, Patterson said, because of attempts by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to re-open to off-roading four areas of the dunes -- about 50,000 acres -- that were closed six years ago to protect a plant threatened with extinction. The scarab beetles also live in that area.

In March, a federal judge sided with environmental groups and struck down the bureau's proposal, saying the temporary closures were a reasonable alternative for managing the dunes for multiple use and species protection.

Patterson said if the bureau and the off-road lobby agreed to keep those areas closed, he would be satisfied.

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

Doran Sanchez, a spokesman for the bureau, said the areas remain closed.

He said he couldn't comment further because legal action was ongoing.

Grant George, president of the American Sand Association and owner of a Rialto dune buggy shop, said he was "elated" over the Fish and Wildlife ruling and hopes the 50,000 acres will eventually reopen to off-roading.

"There's no scientific reason to close it," he said.

The dunes average about 1 million to 1.2 million visitors year round, according to the bureau.