

# San Francisco Chronicle

FRIDAY, JANUARY 19, 2001

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## Compromise Over Desert Protects 24 State Species

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CHRONICLE ENVIRONMENTAL WRITER

### Environmental and recreation groups in accord

In a landmark settlement designed to protect the fragile California desert, the federal government agreed to aid two dozen rare animals and plants in areas from the Imperial Valley to the eastern Sierra Nevada.

After 20 years of battles involving the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and environmental and off-road vehicle groups, the groups signed the agreement Wednesday.

The U.S. District Court in San Francisco has yet to approve the agreement, which settles a March lawsuit brought by the Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Club and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

Winning protections are bighorn sheep, desert tortoises, desert pupfish, Inyo California towhees, least Bell's vireo, Peirson's milkvetch and 18 other species.

Under the agreement, the BLM will close little-used roads, cover dumps and move sheep and cattle from sensitive areas on 11 million acres, scattered over the 25 million-acre California Desert Conservation Area, a quarter of the state protected by Congress in 1976.

The agreement remains in effect until the BLM comes into full compliance with the Endangered Species Act.

"This agreement says that the BLM will enforce the act, and finish its plans to protect 24 species in the California desert. This puts the BLM on a firm timetable," said Elden Hughes, a Sierra Club leader working on desert protection for a quarter century.

The east side of the settlement lands are bordered by the Colorado River north to Nevada. On the west side, the lands go through the Peninsular Ranges and the San Bernardino, San Gabriel and Tehachapi mountains to the Sierra Nevada. The lands reach from the Imperial Valley in the south up through the Colorado, Mojave and Great Basin deserts.

Tim Salt, BLM's California Desert district manager in Riverside, said, "We negotiated hard, and we think the things that we agreed to will protect the species in the interim until we can address how they should be handled in the longterm."

The BLM is amending a 1980 plan for the desert, and expects to complete it within two years.

Daniel Patterson, desert ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, based in Tucson, said BLM's tardiness spurred his group to sue.

"The desert has been suffering for at least 100 years. With the population pressures, there has to be some moderation and a sustainable land-use ethic so these species do not go extinct," Patterson said.

The settlement is intricately designed to stave off the threats from predators, domestic animals and humans, all of which are taking their toll on the disappearing wildlife.

The middle of the Algodones Dunes, on the original shoreline of the Salton Sea, will be closed to protect the milkvetch.

Grazing and road use will be curtailed in some areas to protect the desert tortoise, which is most vulnerable when it comes out of hibernation March and April.

"It's got to eat during the next three months and get all the food and all the water that it's going to get for the year. It knows the succulent plants — 40 different species. If the sheep get there first, then the tortoises don't have the plants they need," Hughes said.

The town of Lancaster, in Los Angeles County, has a sewage pond where ravens prey on the desert tortoise, he said. "We have open landfills throughout every rural county attracting hundreds of ravens. If you have a major paved highway, there will be no tortoises within a half mile of it. They will all have been killed — run over and shot.' Some roads go right into lambing areas of the bighorn sheep, which inhabit the San Jacinto Mountains south to Mexico. Dunn Road, south of Palm Springs, will be closed. Joining on the side of the BLM in the suit were the California Association of 4-Wheel Drive Clubs, High Desert Multiple Use Coalition, Desert Vipers Motorcycle Club, San Diego Off-Road Coalition and the Blueribbon Coalition.

"We were trying to get a balance between the recreationalists' needs and also protecting the environment," said Don Klusman, a consultant with the four-wheel drive association.

The off-roaders were disappointed about some of the closures, particularly the Algodones Dunes and Surprise Canyon in the Panamint Mountains.

Chuck Smith, a staff member for the four-wheel drive group, said, "What we want is to have some place where we can four-wheel or two-wheel. But we definitely don't want to go through and destroy endangered animals and plants."

► **COMPROMISE**

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<b>Species in Conservation Area</b>		
<b>Animals</b>		
Federal Endangered Species Act listed animal species in the bureau of Land Management Desert conservation Area:		
<b>Common name</b>	<b>Scientific name</b>	<b>Status</b>
Desert tortoise	<i>Gopherus agassizi</i>	Threatened
Peninsular ranges bighorn sheep	<i>Ovis canadensis cremnobates</i>	Endangered
Mojave chub	<i>Gila bicolor mohavensis</i>	Endangered
Desert pupfish	<i>Cyprinodon macularis</i>	Endangered
Desert slender salamander	<i>Batrachoseps aridis</i>	Endangered
<b>Coachella Valley</b>		
fringe-toed lizard	<i>Uma inornata</i>	Threatened
Bald eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	Threatened
California condor	<i>Gymnogyps californianus</i>	Endangered
Yuma Clapper rail	<i>Rallus longirostris yumanensis</i>	Endangered
Southwestern willow flycatcher	<i>Empidonax traillii extrimus</i>	Endangered
Least Bell's vireo	<i>Vireo belli puslus</i>	Threatened
Inyo California towhee	<i>Pipilo fuscus eremophilus</i>	Endangered
Amargosa vole	<i>Microtus californicus scirpensis</i>	Endangered
Arroyo toad	<i>Bufo microscaphus californicus</i>	
<b>Plants</b>		
Federal Endangered Species Act listed plant species in the bureau of Land Management Desert conservation Area:		
<b>Species common name</b>	<b>Scientific name</b>	<b>Status</b>
Cushenberry milkvetch	<i>Astragalus albens</i>	Endangered
Lane Mountain milkvetch	<i>Astragalus jaegerianus</i>	Endangered
Coachella Valley milkvetch	<i>Astragalus lentiginosus</i> var. <i>coachellae</i>	Endangered
Peirson's milkvetch	<i>Astragalus magdalenae</i> var. <i>peirsonii</i>	Threatened
Triple-ribbed milkvetch	<i>Astragalus tricarinatus</i>	Endangered
Perish's daisy	<i>Erigeron parishii</i>	Threatened
Cushenberry buckwheat	<i>Eriogonum ovalifolium</i> var. <i>vineum</i>	Endangered
Ash Meadows gumplant	<i>Grindelia fraxinopratensis</i>	Threatened
Amargosa niterwort	<i>Nitrophila mohavensis</i>	Endangered
Cushenberry oxytheca	<i>Oxytheca parishii</i> var. <i>goodmaniana</i>	Endangered
<i>Source: Center for Biological Diversity</i>		

*Chronicle Graph*