

Korean giant to have California Hyundai-Kia test site ready this year

By Jim Skeen
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Sep. 20--CALIFORNIA CITY, Calif. -- With litigation over protection of the desert tortoise and the Mojave ground squirrel resolved, Hyundai Motor Co. expects to complete its new \$50 million vehicle proving ground this year. The proving ground, which will be used to test new Hyundai and Kia cars and trucks, is being built north of Highway 58, about eight miles east of Mojave. There will be a 6.4-mile oval track, a vehicle-handling course, a paved hill road and several special-surface roads.

A 30,000-square-foot complex for offices and indoor testing will also be built. About 40 to 50 people are expected to be employed at the proving grounds.

"We're in the final stages of paving the track," said company spokesman Chris Hosford. "We have the building under construction. We don't have a completion date, but we expect it will be completed this year."

In February, two conservation groups, the Center for Biological Diversity and Defenders of Wildlife,

filed a lawsuit claiming that environmental reviews were inadequate and that the track could harm desert tortoises and Mojave ground squirrels.

In a settlement, Hyundai agreed to purchase additional land for desert tortoises that will be privately held and managed; dropped a plan to relocate desert tortoises into designated tortoise habitat elsewhere, which had raised concerns about the spreading of disease; and agreed to place most of the area's affected Barstow woolly sunflower plants inside a conservation easement and to provide location details for a state database.

"The settlement offers some conservation benefit, but overall the track is a big net loss for endangered wildlife and open space in the West Mojave," said Daniel R. Patterson, ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. "Hyundai has shown no concern for the environment, but the lawsuit forced them to take some responsibility. The Bush Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game didn't protect endangered species; they gave away the store."

Approximately 24 adult tortoises were moved from the test track property. One of the tortoises tested positive for disease and was adopted out.

"I think we did a good job of taking care of the concerns," Hosford said. "Essentially, we purchased additional land beyond what we needed for the track."

Hyundai purchased more than 3,000 acres to be set aside as wildlife habitat in exchange for developing the 4,500-acre test track site.

California City officials said environmentalists gained measures that will probably cost Hyundai about \$5 million, including contributing \$1.5 million to an endowment fund for desert tortoise protection and purchasing the conservation land.