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## Judge blocks off-roader access to SoCal desert tortoise habitat

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SAN FRANCISCO - A federal judge has ordered the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to ban off-road vehicles across more than a half-million acres in Southern California to protect the desert tortoise.

The injunction, issued last week by U.S. District Court Judge Susan Illston, was praised by environmentalists who said it sent a message to the Bush administration and public land agencies that wildlife habitat must be protected.

The ban affects portions of two large desert wildlife areas in Riverside, San Bernardino and Imperial counties. The land is marked with washes popular with off-roaders but considered by environmentalists critical to the survival of the desert tortoise, which is protected under the Endangered Species Act.

While the ban was being implemented immediately, BLM officials predicted it would be temporary - lasting only until a new scientific report on the desert tortoise is released in about six weeks.

"We are expecting a new biological opinion by the end of February, so that means the duration of the restriction will be fairly short," said Jan Bedrosian, a BLM spokeswoman in

Sacramento.

The injunction came as part of a lawsuit filed in 2003 by the Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Club and two other groups seeking to overturn federal desert management plans.

"The court's ruling checks the abuses of the executive branch, and upholds the Endangered Species Act, America's most important wildlife law," said Daniel Patterson, an ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Anyone caught driving in the washes during the ban could face a \$1,000 fine or up to 12 months in prison, although officials said prison time is unlikely.

Off-road groups decried the ruling, saying the tortoise population was declining due to ravens, drought and disease - not their vehicles.

"Desert tortoises don't live in washes; they have more sense," said Ed Waldheim, president of the California Off-Road Vehicle Association. "Desert storms have more impact on the landscape than off-road vehicles ever will."