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Actions Renew Tensions Over Use of Desert Land

Release of the west Mojave plan and a judge's rejection of a proposal for the Algodones Dunes reignite debate.

by Janet Wilson
Times Staff Writer

A pair of decisions in the last two days governing recreation, conservation and development across several million acres of California desert are reigniting tensions over endangered species and motorized access in the fast-growing region.

Late Tuesday, U.S. Bureau of Land Management officials signed the west Mojave management plan, designed to streamline construction and map areas for motorized recreation and wildlife protection on 9.3 million acres of public land in five counties and 11 cities. Parts of Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Riverside, Kern and Inyo counties are included in the plan, which took 12 years to craft.

"You have tremendous, growing populations in ... the west Mojave, and then you try to balance that with conservation of species, and it becomes a very, very delicate balancing act, and that's what we think

this plan achieved," said Jan Bedrosian, spokeswoman for the bureau's California office. The plan identifies vital areas for the threatened desert tortoise, Mohave squirrel and 98 other species, pinpoints off-road trails, and lays out areas that could be developed.

But the plan was promptly lambasted by environmentalists and off-road vehicle groups, who said that thousands of miles of riding trails had been improperly mapped, that there were no funds for enforcement or implementation, and that lawsuits were inevitable.

"They don't have a nickel — not a nickel — to implement any of it," said Roy Denner, president of the Off-Road Business Assn., who was appointed by Interior Secretary Gale Norton to serve on the BLM's Desert District Advisory Council and who has monitored the plan closely.

"It wasn't done well," he said. What they were trying to do — and it's

pretty naive — is they were trying to provide for every kind of environmental concern they could with the idea that it would prevent lawsuits, and it's just the other way around. They're going to get sued by the environmental extremists ... and off-road access is going to be cut off. It's a joke."

Tom Egan, a former bureau biologist who worked on the early stages of the plan before leaving the agency, called the final version "egregious," and said it would lead to the disappearance of the tortoise in many areas and leave other species "on hospital beds." He noted that the plan included measures for placing signs indicating trails were open to offroading, but none to say which areas were closed.

A spokesman for the Center for Biological Diversity — an environmental group that has long opposed the expansion of off-road driving in the desert — said that the plan would harm the desert tortoise in particular.

and that the organization probably would sue to stop it.

On Wednesday, U.S. District Court Judge Susan Illston threw out another bureau plan and a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biological report for the Algodones Dunes to the south that would have greatly expanded off-roading, saying that the plan would harm the federally protected Pierson's milk vetch wildflower and the desert tortoise, and that the agencies had wrongly interpreted the Endangered Species Act.

The judge "basically shredded their plan," said Daniel Patterson, an ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. Noting that about half of the most popular parts of the dunes remain open to riders, he said: "It's time for them to compromise and recognize that 50% is enough."

Bedrosian said bureau officials had not seen the decision and could not comment immediately. She said officials thought they had adequately protected species by calling for tightly controlled riding on designated routes with heavy monitoring.

Vince Brunasso of the American Sand Assn., which intervened on

the side of the government to have 49,000 acres of the popular dunes reopened to riding, said: "I agree. Let's compromise. Let's have 50% of the dunes in North America reopened then, because if you do the math and add up all the acres we have access to, it falls far short of 50%."

Brunasso said the Algodones Dunes "are different, and they're beautiful, and we can't go to the deep center section. The American people are being robbed of the ability to enjoy that beauty ...we're not done fighting."

He said his group would try to have the Pierson's milk vetch delisted as an endangered species.

"The BLM counted 1.8 million milk vetch last year. I don't know how many you have to have before an official person would say its not endangered or threatened" and off-highway vehicle use can coexist with it, he said.

Patterson and others have said the wildflower is doing better for now because of good rains last year and because offroading has been banned in key areas.

