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## Land manager watches domain

**INLAND DESERT:** As part of his job, the federal official will have to balance competing interests.

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**By JENNIFER BOWLES**  
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Steve Borchard enjoys challenges, and to him there's no better place than the California desert to tackle them.

"This is one of the coolest places to work ... just the sheer size of it," Borchard, 53, said.

As the appointed head of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management's desert district, Borchard oversees some 10.5 million acres from the Mexican border to the Sierra foothills, including large swaths of Riverside and San Bernardino counties, from an office in Moreno Valley.

And on those acres, he'll have to balance myriad issues, from new solar, wind and geothermal energy projects to historic trails, endangered species habitat, mining projects, cattle grazing and off-roading, to name a few.

In his four months on the job, Borchard said he's gotten out to the lands overseen by the BLM at every opportunity.

"There are so many unique and beautiful areas that I feel really like I've just scratched the surface," he said in an interview this week.

A mountain biker and hiker, he's taken to the trails in the San Jacinto and Santa Rosa Mountains National Monument that rises above the Coachella Valley and at the Big Morongo Canyon Preserve north of Desert Hot Springs. This week, he made his second trip to Surprise Canyon.

The rocky canyon laced with threads of trickling water, straddling Death Valley National Park and BLM lands, was put off-limits to four-wheel truck drivers who "crawl" their vehicles over boulders while two federal agencies decide whether they should be kept out for good.

"Steve Borchard wanted to look at it personally, which I thought was a good sign," said Daniel Patterson, of the Center for Biological Diversity, which sued to get the closure to protect the rare wildlife that lives there.

Borchard has also traveled to the

most disputed and litigated patches in the desert, the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area, stretching 40 miles north from the Mexican border and five miles wide.

Off-roaders who crest the sandy peaks that go as high as 300 feet have fought to open portions of the dunes that were closed six years ago to protect a threatened plant.

Environmental groups fight just as hard to keep those portions closed.

Borchard got deep into the dunes, riding in a sand rail with Grant George, who owns a dune buggy shop in Rialto and is president of the American Sand Association.

"He brings a very hands-on, can-do attitude to the desert district," said George, who described Borchard as personable and straightforward about the fact that he has to balance various and often opposing interests.

"He said, 'You're not going to like everything I do, but I hope we build a respect for each other and at least we can disagree but not be disagreeable,'" George recalled. "I thought

that was great.”

Borchard got his interest in land issues growing up on a farm in Ventura County, where his family grew strawberries, avocados and lima beans.

His father worked for the Soil Conservation Service, an arm of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In college, Borchard majored in soil and water sciences at UC Davis, a background that gives environmental groups hope that he understands the intricacies of the desert landscape.

“Riparian areas are the most important and threatened habitat types in the desert. If we have a district manager who knows what they are, that’s good,” said Patterson, whose group has filed several lawsuits aimed at protecting desert washes and streams.

Throughout Borchard’s career, he has worked at the Natural Resources Conservation Service, also an arm of the Agriculture Department, where he did wetlands mapping and conservation planning. At the BLM, Borchard has worked mostly in Nevada and Redding, where he was the agency’s manager on a project aimed at restoring the Trinity River.

For the past eight years, Borchard worked at the BLM’s Washington, D.C., office, where he oversaw river and rangeland issues.

During his tenure in Moreno Valley, Borchard said he wants to implement management plans that have been in the works for years and aim to balance activities across the desert, the last covering the western Mojave

Desert, which he signed off on in March.

“When I leave,” Borchard said, “I want better conditions here than when I arrived, and that’s physical conditions on the ground and working relationships with partners.”