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### Local News

# Off-road routes may be closed to protect tortoises

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### STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

Two popular off-road vehicle routes in the Mojave Desert may be closed to protect the desert tortoise habitat, infuriating some local off-roaders who complain more and more recreation land is being locked up.

The Center for Biological Diversity protested a 2008 decision by the Bureau of Land Management to open the off-road vehicle routes in Kern County. Last week, a judge for the Department of Interior's Interior Board of Land Appeals upheld the group's appeal.

Ileene Anderson, a spokeswoman for the center, said she hopes it means the roads will be closed soon to protect the imperiled desert tortoise. Desert tortoise populations have declined in recent years and are now protected under federal and state endangered species law.

The group filed its appeal after the agency decided to open the roads in connection with a plan on managing the desert that had been struck down in federal court last year.

"We were thrilled that the judge saw that there were problems with how this was all implemented," Anderson said.

Bureau of Land Management spokesman John Dearing said his office has not received the decision and would not comment.

The roads in question include one that runs from Jawbone Canyon to the Rand Mountains and one that runs from that road down to California City.

Hundreds of thousands of off-roaders would be affected by a closure, not only impacting local riders but the Kern economy generally because so many out-of-towners recreate in the area, said Ed Waldheim of California City, a former president of the California Off-Road Vehicle Association.

He complained more and more of the desert is being taken away from riders but given to the military and to big corporations for energy projects.

"It's pathetic how they keep shamelessly locking up public land so the public won't be able to use it," Waldheim said.

- The Associated Press and Californian government editor Christine Bedell contributed to this report