

Lauren Morello, *ClimateWire* reporter

A new study suggests environmentalists' long-standing opposition to recreational off-road vehicles could get a boost from concerns about greenhouse gas emissions.

According to a report released yesterday by the Center for Biological Diversity, recreational, motorized off-road vehicles in California produce 230,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide per year. That's the equivalent to emissions produced by 1.5 million car trips between San Francisco and Los Angeles, says the group, which produced the report with help from the American Lung Association of San Diego & Imperial County.

Moreover, pollution from off-road vehicles in California has doubled over the last 15 years.

With that in mind, CBD is pushing the state of California to consider emissions from the recreational vehicles as it develops regulations to implement the state mandate to cut greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2020. That's the goal set by legislation state officials approved in 2006. Now, the California Air Resources Board is developing a blueprint to achieve that target.

"This is the first opening with the A.B. 32 process we see we can address off-road vehicles," said Chris Kassar, a co-author of the report and a conservation biologist at CBD. "California has this legislation, and its overall goal is to reduce greenhouse gases and a be a leader in curbing global warming. What we're saying is that all sectors need to be reduced."

According to CARB, transportation -- the broad sector into which off-road vehicles fall -- accounts for about 40 percent of California's overall greenhouse gas emissions. Within that slice of the emissions pie, 74 percent of emissions come from passenger vehicles, 20 percent from heavy-duty trucks and 3 percent from domestic aviation.

Recreational off-road vehicles are lumped into a category called "other mobile sources," which accounts for 3 percent of transportation emissions and also includes bulldozers and construction equipment, lawnmowers, pleasure boats and Jet Skis.

'Every sector is going to have to pull its own weight'

The CBD report recommends that California reject federal permit applications to continue or expand off-road vehicle use in areas that do not meet air quality standards and require federal agencies applying for state funding and permits to demonstrate they are addressing greenhouse gas emissions and pollution caused by off-road vehicle use.

It also calls for the state to eliminate its "red sticker" registration for recreational off-road vehicles that don't meet state air pollution standards. Current rules restrict the use of "red sticker" vehicles in certain state and federal parks, forests and recreation areas with poor air quality. "Green sticker" off-road vehicles may be used on any public lands.

The new climate report is the latest wrinkle in a long-standing battle over the use of recreational off-road vehicles on public lands. CBD and other environmental groups have long sought to restrict or end such use, based largely on concerns about the vehicles' effects on sensitive ecosystems and endangered or threatened species.

That environmentalists are now looking at the issue from a climate change angle is not surprising, said Brian Hawthorne, public lands policy director for the BlueRibbon Coalition, a recreation group.

"What we have here is the Center for Biological Diversity using the public's attention to human causes of climate change as a tool in their effort to eliminate vehicle use on public lands," he said.

Hawthorne also questioned why California officials would set new emissions targets for ORVs, given their relatively small contribution to California's overall emissions. "If I use my red-sticker dirt bike on a public lands trail that's 5 miles from my house, versus a family who goes camping and uses mountain bikes but drives an SUV 500 miles to its favorite park, which of us contributes more to global warming?" he asked.

An official with the California Air Resource Board said state regulators have not ruled out seeking emissions from any sector or sub-sector at this point.

"Every sector's going to have to pull its own weight," said CARB spokesman Stanley Young. "Obviously, we're going to be getting more reductions from some sectors than others. And we need to make sure it is cost-effective."