

Off-road bill has partial backing of ATV buffs

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A proposed law establishing an annual fee aimed to help rehabilitate landscapes and fine those who damage the environment with off-highway vehicles has the conditional support of some all-terrain vehicle enthusiasts.

ATVs need to be governed by some rules, according to Jeff Wilson, owner of Wild West Motor Sports in Yuma. The bill creates a set of statutes for ATVs that Arizona doesn't have now, Wilson said.

The bill, House Bill 2573, whose sponsors include Yuma Democratic Rep. Lynne Pancrazi, received preliminary approval in the House this week. It would require a \$20 to \$25 annual registration fee of off-highway vehicle owners and make it a misdemeanor to divert the vehicles from paths in a way that damages wildlife or natural resources.

"A lot of states in the Southwest and California have had renewable registration fees for years," Wilson said. "This bill is just catching up with other states."

The fees would go toward enforcement of ATV laws in the same way auto registration fees go toward highway safety laws, Wilson noted. ATVs should not be damaging wildlife or habitat, he added.

There are already plenty of trails available for ATVs without riders doing any damage and the state could use some enforcement, Wilson said.

"If there's one riding irresponsibly, he needs to get a ticket. He's damaging the reputation of the rest of ATV riders."

The majority of ATV riders are responsible, Wilson said. However, there will probably be some people disappointed if a renewable fee is established.

"I would be behind it as long as all the money goes toward ATV purposes - law enforcement and safety programs," Wilson said.

Other ATV dealerships in Yuma were not available for comment Wednesday.

Environmentalists are giving initial support for the bill, but they expressed doubts that it would achieve what it is intended to do.

"I guess that anything that is going to cut down on places where folks ride and limit damage is good," said Chris Kassar, wildlife biologist for the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity.

Kassar said one of the difficulties with this bill is the committee that oversees how the money collected by fees is spent is dominated by off-road groups.

A little less than half the funds raised from the registration fee is slated for law enforcement, education and repair of ATV impact, Kassar said, but 35 percent of the money will be for construction of new trails.

"That's a concern to us when we really need to crack down on mitigation of environmental damage," Kassar said. "To put money toward opening new places seems counter to what agencies taxed with protecting the environment should do."

The bill received preliminary House approval Tuesday on a vote of 35-9. Rep. Theresa Ulmer, D-Yuma, voted to support it.

"ATVs have grown in popularity recently and users are not always aware of where they should ride or the importance of not making new trails," Ulmer said.

Some of the environmental impacts addressed will be problems of dust and damage to plant and animal life, she added.

Last year, a similar bill passed the House but failed in the Senate by one vote. The bill needs to pass one more final vote in the House before it is sent on to the Senate, where, Ulmer said, it will probably pass by a smaller margin.

It would then go to Gov. Janet Napolitano for signing.

"In my opinion, she is likely to sign it," Ulmer said.