



June 25, 2008

\$23 off-road fee brings mixed reactions

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A Yuma off-road enthusiast is calling a proposed \$23 annual user fee for off-highway vehicles a step toward restricting off-roaders' access to public lands, but an environmentalist is calling the fee a step in the right direction.

Senate Bill 1167, which was approved Monday by the Arizona Senate, would make any person who rides an off-highway vehicle pay the annual fee.

Its basic purpose is to gather the user fees, which is an offset of the current registration fees and permits associated with the use of off-road vehicles, to help protect Arizona's land from reckless off-roading that is creating illegal trails. It also aims at maintaining and building designated trails and to provide more law enforcement officials to enforce the law.

The bill now goes to Gov. Janet Napolitano. A spokesman for the governor had no comment on whether she would sign the bill into law.

Danny Kujala of Yuma, who is an off-road enthusiast, said his major

concern about the bill is that it'll just end up closing more areas in public land.

"It's horrible that the bad people ruin it for the people that don't abuse the land," Kujala said. "I never did any harm when I went out to those places. I admired the beauty and I stayed on the trails.

"I doubt it'll be what your money's worth and hopefully they don't close all the lands," he said.

Paul Hirth, parts and accessory manager at Liberty Motorsports on Arizona Avenue, said he doesn't have a problem with the fees that could be imposed to off-roaders. He said Arizona, just like California, should be paying user fees because all-terrain vehicles are the ones that are tearing up the land.

Cindy Tuell, Southwest conservation advocate of Arizona of Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson, said if the bill is signed, part of the funds gathered from the user fees is a guaranteed use for restoring damaged land and adding law enforcement to prevent people making illegal trails.

She said it takes just one person to drive across the desert making an

illegal trail because every person who passes by will assume it's an available road to drive on.

"What's really good about the registration is the ability to identify people who are violating the rules, and know how many people are actually using off-road vehicles," Tuell said.

"The center is really glad this is going to be like a registration process for many off-road users. We will get law enforcement people needed because if you can't hire law enforcement agents then it would be meaningless," Tuell said.

"I think a lot of people think there is nothing in public lands to harm, but the desert is very fragile."