

Sierra Club suit: Buggies off dunes

Club contends buffer zone between riders, preserves is ignored.

By David Sneed
San Luis Obispo Tribune

California State Department of Parks and Recreation has settled one environmental lawsuit over the Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area, but now faces a new one.

The Center for Biological Diversity said last week it has settled a lawsuit it filed over popular off-road vehicle charity races held at the park.

On the same day, the Sierra Club filed a separate suit aimed at shutting down dune buggy riding in about a third of the park.

The local chapter of the Sierra Club's suit alleges that the state illegally allows off-highway vehicles to ride on 584 acres within the park that is owned by the county but leased to the state.

The group had announced its intention to file the suit in February.

The Sierra Club maintains that coastal planning documents designate the land as a buffer zone between riding areas and ecological preserves within the park. State parks department, though, says the park's General



FRESNO BEE FILE

The dunes park has been open to motorized vehicles since 1975. Last week the Center for Biological Diversity's suit over off-road vehicle charity races at the park was settled with the state parks department.

Plan allows for off-highway vehicle riding in the county's so-called La Grande tract.

Sierra Club's suit seeks to force the

removal of off-highway vehicles from the county land.

The state leases the land from the county for \$1 a year. State

parks department plans to allow continued use of the parcel by off-highway vehicles and wants to resolve the issue by buying purchasing the land for \$4.8 million.

State parks department officials and off-road enthusiasts argue that the county parcel has been used for riding for decades and the park is one of the last places in the state where people can drive on the beach.

The state is in closed-door negotiations with the county to purchase the property. The lease agreement expires in June, and county supervisors recently extended sale negotiations on a month-by-month basis.

Also last week, the state parks department agreed to rescind a multiyear permit for the annual Oceano Dunes Endurance Beach

Race. The move settled a lawsuit filed in November by the Center for Biological Diversity.

If the Central Coast Motorcycle Association applies for a new permit to hold the races, a study will have to be done assessing their impact on rare plants and animals found in the park, said Andrew Orahoske, a conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity.

“The Oceano Dunes are important for a variety of wildlife unique to California,” he said, “and not enough is being done to safeguard them.” The annual off-road vehicle race and jet-ski competition is held in October and attracts thousands of people. Proceeds benefit spinal cord injury research.

Before the lawsuit, the state parks department determined that the event would not have a significant

impact on the environment. That determination is valid through 2011.

The organizers of the event have applied for a permit for the event this year, and the department is in the process of determining exactly what type of review will be required under the California Environmental Quality Act, said Andrew Zilke, Oceano Dunes superintendent. “Doing additional and more thorough review is good for us,” Zilke said.