

Off-roaders subject of lawsuit

COALITION: Environmental and property groups take action against federal agencies over desert plans.

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Environmental and private property groups filed a lawsuit Monday against federal agencies they allege allow off-road vehicles to run rampant in Southern California deserts, harming imperiled wildlife and disrupting homeowners.

The lawsuit by the Sierra Club, the Center for Biological Diversity and eight other groups seeks to overturn major land-use plans by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management across 7.1 million acres of the desert -- including large swaths in Riverside and San Bernardino counties. The plans were approved in the past few years.

"This is no question that excessive off-roading causes extensive damage to desert soils, vegetation and wildlife," said Jeff Aardahl, a veteran desert biologist who recently retired from the BLM and now works occasionally for the Center for Biological Diversity.

He said that although BLM officials are aware of the harm the vehicles cause to desert tortoises, "they are doing little to nothing to stop it."

Stephen Razo, a spokesman for the BLM, said he couldn't comment on the lawsuit because the agency was reviewing it.

Lois Grunwald, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said she also couldn't comment on the lawsuit. The wildlife agency was named as a defendant because officials signed off on the land-use plans after finding they would not harm the desert tortoise and other federally protected animals threatened with extinction.

Roy Denner, president of the Off-Road Business Association, a trade group with members in the Inland area, said the plans in question were crafted to avoid such lawsuits.

"In our mind, those plans were developed with an effort to appease the environment as much as possible," said Denner, a seven-year member of the BLM's desert advisory council. In fact, he said, the off-road community was "really unhappy with them."

Denner characterized the lawsuit as the latest attempt to reduce the amount of land available for off-roading.

"They want it all closed," he said of the environmental groups, "there's no compromise."

Aardahl said that since he began work with the BLM in the 1970s, the number of desert tortoises has diminished by 90 percent.

Where there were 200 or 400 tortoises per square mile, there is now only about 10 percent of that, he said.

"It's a disgrace we have to go to court to save species from agencies that are supposed to be protecting and recovering them," said Karen Schambach, California representative for Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, a plaintiff in the lawsuit.

Jason Fried, with the Alliance for Responsible Recreation, another plaintiff, said the BLM plans allow for a process by which off-roading routes are added without considering the environment and in some cases cut right through private property.

"We want to see them create a system that's more responsible to the private property owners and to the land itself that they're supposed to be a good steward of," said Fried, of Riverside.

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Online at: http://www.pe.com/localnews/inland/stories/PE_News_Local_D_offroad15.299d3a4.html