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Sand dunes expecting full house

By Jeffrey Gautreaux

About 200,000 people are expected at the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area over the Thanksgiving weekend — one of the busiest times of the year for off-road recreation in the area.

"The last few years it's been a little less than that," said Stephen Razo, director of external affairs for the California Desert District of the Bureau of Land Management.

"We're doing an efficient job of cracking down on the lawlessness. We've started to see more families, and we're expecting that trend (to continue)."

Temporary closures to about 49,000 acres of the dunes, due to environmental concerns, will continue through the holiday weekend. About 68,000 acres — 106 square miles — remain open, Razo said.

Razo said 100 law enforcement officials from different agencies, including BLM, the Imperial County Sheriff's Office, California Highway Patrol and U.S. Border Patrol, will be patrolling the dunes. Also, 50 emergency medical staffers will be on hand.

Razo said all enforcement will be orchestrated from an incident command center. He said this enforcement system has worked well to decrease illegal activity at the dunes.

ICSO Sgt. Mark McNay of the Off Highway Vehicle Enforcement Safety Team said large numbers are expected

at the dunes because there are so many new off-road enthusiasts.

"In the last six weeks, of the people I have talked to, 80 percent are first-timers," McNay said.

"Or they are folks who used to go and are returning because they heard it is a safer place."

The dunes may be safer, but there is still danger.

McNay said five people have died as a result of dunes accidents since Oct. 1. He said this appeared to be average, considering the thousands of people that come out.

However, McNay said almost all accident deaths can be prevented.

"We want people to do risk management when operating vehicles."

Razo said there were eight deaths from Oct. 1, 2003, to Sept. 30 of this year.

The temporary closure in the dunes was part of the settlement of a lawsuit brought by the Center for Biological Diversity and other environmental groups. Razo said there is still plenty of room to handle everyone who will be there.

Razo said people have been respecting the closures, and he expects that to continue. Off-road vehicles are not allowed into the North Algodones Wildlife Management Area.

According to a release by CBD, the clo-

sure was needed to protect the Peirson's milk vetch, desert tortoise and other desert species like the Algodones dunes sunflower, flat-tailed horned lizard and Andrew's dunes scarab beetle.

According to a BLM release, the "zero tolerance" law enforcement policy will remain in effect at the dunes.

"We check for any impairment," Razo said. "That could be alcohol or that could be drugs."

McNay said zero tolerance also included off-highway driving violations. He said it means that no leeway is given and all regulations must be followed.

He said that law enforcement has been working to educate people before they ever go to the dunes.

"We want to make people aware," he said. "Not just through paying fines."

A sobriety checkpoint will be set up in the area Thursday and Friday. Razo said the location of the checkpoint has not been determined.

The area known as competition hill will be closed this weekend from a half-hour before sunset until a half-hour after sunrise. Violations of the closure will be a misdemeanor punishable by a fine of up to \$500 and six months in jail.

Fees remain at \$25 per week and \$90 for a season pass for each primary vehicle, defined by the BLM as any street legal vehicle used as transportation to the dunes.