



Off-road routes may return to 1980 limits

Federal judge orders change to protect wildlife

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A federal judge in San Francisco has ordered the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to rework its plans for off-road routes in the West Mojave desert while requiring those plans to protect wildlife. U.S. District Court Judge Susan Illston on Saturday ordered the BLM to return off-highway vehicle routes in the desert to those in effect in 1980.

She gave the bureau until March 31, 2014, to establish the routes, over the objections of the Center for Biological Diversity.

In response to a challenge by the center and other groups, including the Sierra Club, the court followed up Saturday on its September 2009 ruling that found that the BLM had violated the National Environmental Policy Act and the Federal Land Policy Management Act.

In the 2009 ruling, the court found that the way the bureau designated off-highway vehicle routes was flawed and that an environmental impact statement provided an incomplete analysis of the effects of the plan on cultural and biological resources and air quality.

The plan ultimately was not in sync with a government land-use plan that limits off-road routes to those that existed in 1980.

Over the objections of the center, which wanted to allow the BLM two years from the date of the

order to establish and sign the routes, Illston on Saturday gave the bureau until 2014.

But Ilene Anderson, a biologist for the plaintiff, said the BLM has no maps from 1980 showing OHV routes. Anderson said the time limit should be no problem for the BLM.

"It's the increased enforcement with reduced resources," Anderson said. "That's the real issue" in keeping off-roaders from re-opening them.

The BLM's response was muted.

"While the judge's ruling specifically requires BLM to revisit the portion of the West Mojave plan that relates to off-highway-vehicle route designations, it's important to note that other parts of the plan were found to be sound," said David Briery, spokesman for the BLM.

"Portions of the plan that deal with conservation and habitat protection - among other things - will be left in place," Briery said. "The BLM now has until March 31, 2014, to issue a revised Record of Decision that addresses issues related to OHV routes. That revised decision will be developed with full public involvement."

The judge denied a plaintiff's request to close Juniper Flats, Wonder Valley and Edwards Bowl