



## Public Land:

### BLM plan for popular Calif. dunes angers enviro, OHV groups

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The Bureau of Land Management has unveiled a new management plan for about 215,000 acres in southeast California's Imperial Sand Dunes that strives to protect sensitive plants and animals while accommodating off-highway vehicle users who are drawn to the area to tackle one of the country's most popular off-road recreation areas.

But BLM's plan has drawn the wrath of some off-highway vehicle (OHV) groups and environmentalists, who complain that it will open up more than 40,000 acres, including important habitat for rare and vanishing species, to unlimited OHV use.

At issue is a newly released recreation area management plan for BLM's Imperial Sand Dunes, which is part of the largest active sand dune formation in North America.

BLM also released a record of decision formalizing the plan in today's Federal Register, as well as amendments to the California Desert Conservation Area Plan. In total, they include measures to provide recreation opportunities for thousands of visitors by making nearly 180,000 acres available for OHV use while protecting critical habitat for the threatened Peirson's milkvetch by closing the plant's habitat in the recreation area to OHV use.

Also known as the Algodones Dunes, the area for years has been the subject of lawsuits and ongoing debate about BLM's multiuse mandate as off-roaders have fought to keep as much acreage as possible open, while some environmentalists demanded protection of the dunes' sensitive plant and animal species.

The Imperial Sand Dunes planning area contains the North Algodones Dunes Wilderness and two areas of critical environmental concern, as well as habitat for several sensitive plant and animal species.

BLM officials say the new recreation management plan strikes a balance between traditional uses of the public land and protection of sensitive species, some of which are found nowhere else in the world.

"More than a million people flock to this unique desert landscape each year to enjoy responsible, family-based off-highway vehicle recreation, stunning scenery and wilderness solitude," BLM California State Director Jim Kenna said in a statement. "This final plan benefited from thorough scientific review and important public feedback, and it will ensure the great family tradition of OHV recreation will continue at Imperial Sand Dunes as we protect key desert habitat."

But the plan has incensed environmentalists, who called it the largest conservation rollback in the California desert in more than a decade. Among other things, they said, it would reduce protected areas by about 40,000 acres, and the plan would conflict with BLM's own goals of ensuring meaningful, enduring conservation of dunes to offset the impacts of large-scale renewable energy projects in the California desert.

"This plan pushes the rare plants and animals of the Algodones Dunes closer to extinction, robbing them of a huge part of their safe haven," said Ileene Anderson, a staff biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity in Los Angeles. "I'm shocked that the BLM decided to adopt such a destructive, damaging plan -- right when it should be carefully protecting these wild creatures and places to make up for vast energy projects that are being developed nearby."

Anderson and others say the massive dunes create unique habitats for numerous species, from lush woodlands on the east side to shifting blowsands in the middle and stabilized sand flats on the west side.

In addition to the Peirson's milkvetch, the area is home to the Mojave desert tortoise, which is protected under the Endangered Species Act, along with the Algodones Dunes sunflower, flat-tailed horned lizard and several dozen invertebrate species that live nowhere else on the planet. The Center for Biological Diversity in July 2012 petitioned to protect another dunes species, the Colorado Desert fringe-toed lizard, under the Endangered Species Act.

"The Interior Department's decision is just baffling," said Karen Schambach, coordinator of the Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility's California office. "The current situation allows ample opportunity for vehicles on the dunes. This change displays a frightful ignorance of biology and a complete disregard for wildlife habitat from an agency the public trusts to protect these sensitive areas."

Terry Frewin, chairman of the Sierra Club's Desert Committee, blasted Interior Secretary Sally Jewell, saying "she's apparently willing to let BLM sacrifice a crown jewel of the California Desert Conservation Area" to appease the OHV lobby.

But OHV advocacy groups say they are unhappy with the plan and the removal of areas from OHVs.

"To say the newest Imperial Sands plan is balanced lacks any historical perspective," said Brian Hawthorne, public-lands policy director for the Pocatello, Idaho-based BlueRibbon Coalition, an OHV interest group.

Hawthorne said the plan is just the latest effort to slowly remove public lands from OHV users that has been ongoing for years in the California desert.

"It's like fighting over a pie," he said. "You start out with a whole pie, then you lose half, then you're expected to lose the other half. You can extrapolate to the future when there won't be a crumb left for us. So I don't call this a balanced plan, I call this another step toward our eventual elimination. It's just the latest closure."

BLM says the final plan is based on new scientific data, including species and habitat inventories, and a new determination by the Fish and Wildlife Service regarding Peirson's milkvetch's critical habitat. Under a U.S. district court settlement agreement in October 2000, BLM closed about 49,300 acres to motorized vehicle use in five selected areas of the recreation area to protect the Peirson's milkvetch until a new plan was approved and filed with the court.

Once the new plan is formally in place, BLM will manage the area "pursuant to the approved Recreation Area Management Plan," according to the agency.