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U.S. seeks to reopen disputed Imperial Sand Dunes area to off-roaders

By Julie Cart, Los Angeles Times
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Bureau of Land Management draws criticism from environmentalists over a plan to allow recreational vehicles on 40,000 acres that are home to desert animals and threatened plants.

A new federal plan for managing the Imperial Sand Dunes calls for reopening to off-road vehicles 40,000 acres that have been closed since 2000, when the site became embroiled in a legal battle involving threatened plant species.

Counting that acreage, 84% of the 215,000-acre dunes system would be open to motorized recreation under the Bureau of Land Management plan, released Tuesday.

The plan is the result of a 13-year process that moved in fits and starts as each iteration from the agency was challenged in court. Even this solution will remain in legal limbo for a time. A judge has ordered the BLM to keep motorized vehicles out of the closed area for 90 days to allow time for challenges to the plan.

Also known as Algodones Dunes, the region in southeastern Imperial County has for years been the focal point of legal wrangling between off-roaders seeking to keep acreage open and environmentalists demanding protection for the area's sensitive plant and animal species.



Former Interior Secretary Ken Salazar tries to accelerate his sand rail while getting stuck on a sand hill during a tour of the Imperial Sand Dunes in 2011. (Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times / February 20, 2011)



Environmental groups called the plan the largest desert conservation rollback in a decade, limiting protected space for the threatened Pierson's milk vetch and disturbing habitat for desert lizards and other animals.

It allows recreation to trump protection of “a suite of species that are found in the Algodones Dunes and not found anywhere else,” said Illene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the parties to the original lawsuit. Anderson said the group would challenge the new plan.

The BLM intends to set aside 9,000 acres designated as critical habitat for the milk vetch plant. But the off-limits zone is in the middle of an area otherwise open to motorized recreation, making it difficult for authorities to patrol.

“That is the challenge,” said Greg Hill, the BLM project manager for the dunes plan. “Fencing it is not practical. It will be signed and patrolled.”

Hill acknowledged that with only a handful of resource officers patrolling the 200-square-mile recreation area, the agency will rely on motorized recreation groups to assist in education and patrols.

Jim Bramham, a resource consultant with the California Assn. of 4WD Clubs, said off-roads groups are prepared to take on that role.

“We certainly are ready to help the bureau with that education process,” he said. “These are scientifically based closures.” He noted that the closed section is not prime land for off-road vehicles.

Bramham, who is a member of a committee that advises the BLM on desert issues, said the plan is “as reasonable as we could possibly expect. We want a data-driven plan. We got one.”

The Imperial Sand Dunes also carry the lingering reputation as one of the most dangerous off-road recreation areas in the United States. Thanksgiving weekend gatherings draw more than 200,000 people and have led to homicides, traffic fatalities and mass arrests.

The region of wind-sculpted bowls and sandy flats draws 1 million visitors a year, providing a significant economic engine in struggling Imperial County. Officials have lobbied the federal government for more funds to manage the vast area, which on busy weekends is patrolled by federal and county law enforcement.

Although the dunes remain popular with off-roaders, visitation has declined by 8% in recent years, in part a reflection of the economic downturn, officials say.