



Inyo County Off-Road Plan Scaled Way Back

by Chris Clarke
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A controversial plan to open up hundreds of miles of dirt roads and city streets to off-road vehicles in Inyo County has been cut back by 95 percent as the result of a settlement in a legal battle over the plan.

Inyo County's Adventure Trails System, which would originally have opened up 242 miles of roads in the county for off-road vehicle users, was the subject of a lawsuit by conservation groups who charged the plan would endanger both the environment and public safety -- including the safety of ORV riders.

But under the terms of a legal settlement announced Tuesday, Inyo will be scaling back the Adventure Trails System to just 44 miles in seven trails. And the county has agreed that any expansion of the system will be subject to full environmental review, including public comment.

The plaintiffs in February's suit, the Center for Biological Diversity and Public Employees for



Off-road vehicles on the trail in Inyo County | Photo: Patrick Maloney/Flickr/Creative Commons License

Environmental Responsibility (PEER), argued that many of the routes in the original 242-mile version of the system would have encouraged incursions into areas legally closed to off-road vehicle use, including protected wilderness and the western fringes of Death Valley National Park.

The original plan would also have allowed ORVs on certain paved roads -- a use that most manufacturers of the vehicles advise against strongly. Most ORVs lack differentials, which allow a vehicle's rear wheels to rotate at different speeds when the operator makes a turn. On a solid surface with no "give," such as asphalt or concrete, that can result in losing control of the vehicle -- which in turn can result in serious injury.

"Limiting the number of miles of roads to be shared by street traffic, pedestrians and off-road vehicles should help reduce harmful impacts and allow research to be done to

determine whether ORVs should be allowed at all on local roads in Inyo County," said Ileene Anderson with the Center for Biological Diversity.

The Adventure Trails System is a pilot project under AB 628, a bill passed by the California Legislature in 2011 that allowed Inyo County to experiment with allowing off-road vehicles on so-called "combined use" roads maintained by the county. The intent was to link separate ORV use areas to one other, and to local services such as food and lodging. The bill only authorizes the county's pilot project until January 1, 2017. At that point, if no action is taken by the Legislature, Inyo County will rejoin the rest of the state in disallowing ORV use on streets and roads used by other vehicles or pedestrians.

"The settlement caps the number of trails in the Adventure Trails System to the seven approved by the Board, but does not allow expansion based on the existing EIR. This provides interim protection for natural and cultural resources, as well as residents, who can still appeal to their legislators to terminate the project in 18 months," said PEER's Karen Schambach.