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# **Coastal Commission Bans Off-Road Vehicles at Oceano Dunes Despite Pleas From State Parks, Riders**

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*A decades-long dispute over environmental and beach access concerns at the only California State Park which allows off-road vehicle recreation on the sand turned a corner Thursday as the Coastal Commission found vehicle use must be phased out over three years.*

The beach at Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreational Area, the only California beach that allows off-road vehicle recreation. (Courthouse News photo / Chris Marshall)

(CN) — A decades-long battle between two California agencies — Department of Parks & Recreation and California Coastal Commission — turned a corner Thursday, where, despite pleas from State Parks and riders, the Coastal Commission found the only state park to allow off-road vehicle recreation on the beach must phase out vehicle use over three years.

The marathon 12-hour meeting — which had over 180 speakers — and unanimous vote came after the commission last year [delayed voting](#) on a [public works plan](#) by State Parks regarding future use and development of [Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area](#) in favor of waiting until State Parks issued a revised draft plan in December.

At Thursday's meeting commissioners did not take up the draft public works plan which is still going through the environmental review process, and instead amended the uses and intensities allowed at Oceano Dunes under a 40-year-old coastal development permit.

The park covers eight miles of beach in San Luis Obispo County — five times the size of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. It's the only state park to allow off-road vehicle use on the beach sand, a recreational activity environmentalists have said damages environmentally sensitive habitat area, and has degraded air quality in violation of the Coastal Act.

Commissioners who are tasked with making land-use decisions along California's coast heeded their staff's recommendation Thursday to amend a permit issued to State Parks in the 1980s following a 2019 finding driving at the park has degraded the dune habitats and native species, including the endangered western snowy plover and least tern.

But the commissioners amended the final resolution to speed up the transition away from off-road vehicle use within three years, rather than the staff recommended five years.

Commissioner Caryl Hart proposed the accelerated phase out of off-road vehicle use. She said she visited Oceano Dunes on her own accord and recognized the people who ride dune buggies at the park.

"We understand how important it is, but we are obligated to comply with the Coastal Act," Hart said.

"In five years least terns and plovers may not survive," she added.

The commission also approved allowing campers to use vehicles at night, but prohibiting off-road vehicle recreation after dark. They also extended the staff-recommended closure of the Pier Avenue vehicle entrance a year from July 1, 2021 to July 1, 2022.

Last year, park and beach closures forced by the Covid-19 pandemic proved a unique looking glass into how the plovers and other animals might utilize the beach at Oceano Dunes absent noisy vehicle traffic.

The shorebirds, as it turned out, took advantage of the beach closure and expanded their nesting and foraging area beyond the fenced-in protection zone in the vehicles' absence.

But State Parks tried to scare off the birds — revealed by a whistleblowing investigation by the Center for Biological Diversity — resulting in a [cease-and-desist order](#) and settlement to keep the park closed to vehicles through last fall.

The Center for Biological Diversity later filed a [lawsuit](#) over State Parks' alleged failure to protect the snowy plovers from off-road vehicles at Oceano Dunes.

Following the vote Thursday, Center for Biological Diversity senior conservation advocate Jeff Miller called the vote a “reprieve for endangered wildlife and coastal dunes habitat [that] will allow the non-motorized public to enjoy our beach and dunes as well as reduce greenhouse gas and dust pollution.”

Miller said in a phone interview with Courthouse News earlier this week he expects the Endangered Species Act lawsuit to be resolved by a court before the dispute over off-road vehicles at Oceano Dunes is settled.

In the meantime, Miller said nesting season for the plovers is already underway and the “usual fencing is up.”

“I personally documented plovers using areas on beach during the covid shutdown where vehicles are now running all over. It remains to be seen, but there [have been] a number of flattened plovers found [in the past] — I don’t expect this to be any different,” Miller said.

Off-road vehicles negatively impacting the wildlife at Oceano Dunes are only one of a sea of issues that the Coastal Commission and State Parks have failed to agree how to address. Visitors to the park have advocated that low-cost camping remain in place to guarantee access to the coast, also mandated under California’s landmark law.

Jim Bramham, vice president of off-road vehicle advocacy group [California Four Wheel Drive Association](#) said in a phone interview his grandparents started visiting Oceano Dunes to recreate in 1921 and it’s been a family gathering spot since.

He now goes to Oceano Dunes with his 14-year-old grandchild to ride off-road vehicles.

“We recognize other people don’t want to recreate our way — given that, there are places to surf and places to swim and there’s Disneyland and there are ski resorts and all these other places you can go do California whatever it is you want to do,” Bramham said.

“All we’re asking for is what we are guaranteed as our little bit — less than one-tenth of 1% of the California coastline to continue with our recreation,” he added.

At Thursday’s meeting, State Parks Director Armando Quintero said resource protections at Oceano Dunes through the agency’s dust control program and habitat conservation plan “are stronger than ever” and the commission “need not enact an [Off-Highway Vehicle] ban.”

“We have already made significant strides toward a more protected and sustainable environment at this park,” Quintero said.

He added: “There have always been competing needs at Oceano Dunes and it has always been the work of Parks and the Commission to find a balance among these interests that best serves everyone. The loss of this recreation would undoubtedly have significant impacts, it would be unfair to treat it as less worthy than other cultural or recreational opportunities of similar longevity.”