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# Conservationists criticize State Parks plan for future of Oceano Dunes

BY KASEY BUBNASH

Local conservationists are criticizing a [draft public works plan](#) and environmental impact report recently developed and released by California State Parks that outlines future development and wildlife habitat management projects proposed for the Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area (SVRA).



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• File Photo By Jayson Mellom

- **LOOKING TO THE FUTURE** State Parks released a draft public works plan and environmental impact report documents for public review on Dec. 31, 2020, and the reports offer some insight into how State Parks plans to address some of the many controversial issues at the Oceano Dunes SVRA.

State Parks released the draft documents for public review on Dec. 31, 2020, and the reports offer some insight into how State Parks plans to address many controversial issues at the dunes, including dust mitigation, access to off-roading and camping, and managing the area's endangered species.

But local environmental groups, which have long blamed off-roading for the SVRA's poor air quality and wildlife breeding rates, say State Parks has once again failed to adequately address the complex issues.

"The take-home message from State Parks is, 'Well, we can't tell you exactly how we're going to fix all these problems but trust us,'" said Jeff Miller, a Los Osos-based senior conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity.

The public works plan has been in the making for years. At a California Coastal Commission meeting in July 2019, commissioners voted down a staff proposal to impose various restrictions on the SVRA—including one that would have limited off-roading in some parts of the park—on the condition that State Parks address the possibility of implementing such regulations.

Those proposals, aimed at improving the management of predators, sensitive species, and wildlife conservation, included adding enclosures around the park's trash bins; installing fencing in areas that are home to sensitive habitats where riding is already prohibited; and permanently closing a 300-acre breeding habitat that is currently only closed seasonally to riding.

Coastal Commission staff also recommended a ban on riding across the Arroyo Grande Creek, which some fish use as a gateway to and from the ocean; a ban on nighttime riding; increased enforcement; reducing the number of vehicles allowed in the park each day; and increased dust mitigation and public outreach.

State Parks was also tasked with evaluating a phasing out of off-roading in the dunes while still allowing street-legal vehicles. Instead of evaluating the potential environmental and health impacts such a move could have on the dunes, Miller said State Parks offered up paragraphs of excuses as to why that isn't possible, namely that it would lose the funding that off-roaders bring in.

"This alternative is not truly feasible," the public works plan reads. "Oceano Dunes receives an annual operation budget of approximately \$12 million, and Pismo [State Beach] is allocated \$2.5 million. If the SVRA were reclassified as a state beach or state park, it would be reasonable to assume that the operating budget would be reduced accordingly."

While the public works plan went on to say that revenue generated by off-roaders in the park goes toward the management of natural and cultural resources, including dune restoration and snowy plover and least-tern management, Miller said many of those projects wouldn't be necessary if it weren't for the damage caused by vehicles in the park.

Miller said State Parks also dodged many of the Coastal Commission's other recommendations. Instead of proposing a ban on night riding, State Parks plans to conduct a study that would evaluate the impacts of such a ban. Rather than prohibiting vehicle crossings at the Arroyo Grande Creek, State Parks hopes to explore the feasibility of installing a bridge over the creek and closing it when it reaches a certain depth.

Worst of all, Miller said, are the campsite and parking lot development projects planned for the Oso Flaco Lake area, which Miller said would essentially destroy the area as an outstanding bird habitat.

"So hopefully the Coastal Commission sees through it and imposes some of their own conditions on them," Miller said. "At this point they should have zero tolerance for these kinds of antics from State Parks."

Other community members are also calling on the Coastal Commission to take a stand on these issues. In an email to *New Times*, SLO County resident Bill House wrote that the public works plan would only continue a pattern of policies that prioritize off-roading over health and safety in Oceano.

"The time has come for the Coastal Commission to revoke the conditional use permit that allows vehicles at the Oceano Dunes State Park until a plan is developed that brings them into full compliance with state, federal, and environmental justice laws, regulations, and permits," House wrote.

The draft public works plan and environmental impact report are available for review online and State Parks is accepting comments until March 2.