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## State Denies Grant to Help Manage Dunes

■ Commission accuses U.S. agency of poor management of the Imperial Sand Dunes off-road recreational area. Cuts in service there may result.

by BETH SILVER

SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

SAN DIEGO — A state commission has refused to continue sharing the cost of operating the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area, saying the federal government has done such a poor job of managing the desert magnet for off-road vehicles that the existence of rare plants and animals is threatened.

On a 4-3 vote, California's Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission this week denied a \$1.1-million grant to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, which oversees the recreation area, part of the 150,000-acre Algodones Dunes.

It was the commission's first refusal in more than 15 years to help pay for maintenance of the desert expanse in the southeastern corner of the state.

"The dunes have now elevated from a local disgrace to a national disgrace, based on the mismanagement there," said Pat Spitler, one of the four commissioners who voted to deny the grant.

Spitler said that besides neglecting environmental concerns, the BLM has failed to limit the number of holiday revelers or curb excessive drinking that has led to violence at nighttime gatherings attended by thousands of off-roaders.

The BLM will ask the state commission to reconsider when the federal agency completes its land management plan, possibly by early summer. The report already is a few months overdue.

In the meantime, the BLM will have to decide where to make cuts in service at the dunes.

Trash cleanup, search and rescue, emergency medical services and park ranger training may all suffer in the recreation area, said a BLM spokeswoman, Jan Bedrosian. The \$1.1-million state grant has accounted for about one-sixth of the money used every year to manage the dunes.

The denial of funding may also affect the BLM's efforts to monitor environmental conditions, Bedrosian said. The milk vetch, which grows in the area, is a threatened plant subject to federal protection. The desert area also is home to dozens of rare animals.

Some environmentalists say the BLM's oversight has been a sham. The agency studies the effects of the off-roaders, but never does anything about them, said Daniel Patterson, desert ecologist at the Center for Biological Diversity in Idyllwild.

"It's not like this was some sucker punch out of right field. The commissioners have been telling them they want to see a different approach at the dunes and they didn't do it," Patterson said. "The state just threw up their hands and said, 'BLM, if you want to continue to manage this place like a scene out of a Mad Max movie, fund it yourself.' "

In addition to cutting services, the BLM may also turn to off-roaders to make up for the lack of state funds. Off-roaders already pay \$30 annually to use the dunes, or \$10 for a week. A fee increase would amount to

double or triple taxation to the off-roaders, who also pay a state environmental fee when they register their vehicles, said Don Amador, western representative of the Blue Ribbon Coalition, an off-road group.

Amador said he believes the commission's vote Thursday was politically motivated. Commissioners are still smarting from the Bush administration's plans to open another 50,000 acres of the dunes to off-roaders, he said.

About half the 150,000-acre area, which stretches from the Mexican border to the Chocolate Mountains 40 miles north, currently is closed to off-roading.

About 3 million people visit the dunes every year. Holiday weekends draw as many as 240,000 off-roaders and campers to what has become an increasingly popular and sometimes dangerous spot.

Three people were killed and hundreds were injured, including a park ranger who was run over, during Thanksgiving weekend in 2001.

While the state commission is declining to support the BLM's land management portion, it continues to aid law enforcement at the dunes.

In December, it awarded a \$292,000 grant to the BLM and \$800,000 to the Imperial County Sheriff's Department for that purpose.

The BLM is not likely to limit the number of off-roaders who can drive their dune buggies, trucks and dirt bikes through the desert sands, as environmentalists would like, Bedrosian said.