

May 20, 2006

SACRAMENTO – A key commission voted yesterday to move ahead with plans to commit more than \$1 million to buy 4,000 acres of wide-open desert terrain neighboring Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, potentially triggering a new squeeze on off-road riding to protect endangered bighorn sheep, rare palm oases and American Indian culture.

However, the upcoming environmental reviews that will lay out a strategy for managing the newly acquired land could determine that 50 years of off-roading in the region hasn't significantly harmed the environment, which could lead to a recommendation for state-sanctioned riding.

Tucked near Anza-Borrego and the Ocotillo Wells off-road area, the checkerboard parcels are scattered throughout a much larger 14,700-acre area known as Truckhaven/Desert Cahuilla that offers riders 250 miles of roads and trails in pristine backcountry.

“Demand is growing like crazy and opportunities are shrinking every day,” said Roy Denner, president of the Off-Road Business Association. “If this is not an appropriate area, there's probably no place that works.”

The off-road community supported the purchase, agreeing to step aside while state funds collected from taxes on riders are tapped. About half of the money will be repaid out of a separate federal fund over time. No environmental group opposed the purchase.

The California Off-Road Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission, which has been bogged down in bitter internal disputes between environmental interests and riders, approved the purchase in a rare demonstration of unanimity.

“It belongs on our apple cart,” said newly appointed Commissioner Mark McMillin, a prominent San Diego developer and off-road enthusiast.

The region is a magnet for off-roading. Ocotillo Wells drew more than 900,000 riders last year. Organized four-wheel-drive associations offer extensive calendars of special events, and as many as 3,000 riders can converge on a typical weekend.

Meanwhile, growth is creeping closer to the property, and all sides agree developers might swoop in.

The state has been eager to obtain the parcels, owned by a family trust, for about five years. However, funding shortages and the inability of outside interests to agree have kept the project on hold.

Anza-Borrego has a nearly \$13 million backlog of deferred maintenance, and would likely draw criticism if it acquired more land that it wasn't able to properly maintain. Off-road vehicle taxes also contribute \$1 million a year to the operations budget for Anza-Borrego.

The deal was coordinated by the Trust for Public Land, a nonprofit conservation-minded lobby.

Alex Tynberg, the trust's project director, said it was important to buy the property now and work on the more controversial land-use decisions after more study. The trust has to exercise its option to buy the land before July 8.

The trust is not opposed to off-road use that is suitable for the land, Tynberg said. “We would love to do a direct deal with the off-highway commission where there's no controversy. But that's not the case here. It has made the scenario challenging,” he said.

Questions on who would manage the land had dogged talks. The state bans off-road use at Anza-Borrego, leaving riders fearful that if the property is annexed to the park they would automatically be shut out. Environmental interests, however, were concerned that dune buggies and motorcycles would rule if Ocotillo Wells took over management.

Mike Wells, a parks superintendent with jurisdiction over Anza-Borrego, said there have been no prejudgments.

“That's what the environmental studies will tell us,” Wells said.

American Indian tribes also have weighed in, supporting the purchase as vital to holding back development that threatens to overrun some of the cultural and natural heritage sites, including sleeping circles and fish traps along the ancient Lake Cahuilla shoreline.

“You talk about jewels and diamonds and money. We talk about our cultural resources and our spiritual connections to the land,” said Carmen Lucas, a member of the Kwaaymii Laguna Band of Mission Indians.

Nevertheless, Lucas told commissioners that the off-roaders respect the land and her heritage.

“If we do this correctly, we can satisfy everybody's interest,” she said.

The parcels are scattered throughout a region known for its diverse wildlife, including a nearby swath of critical habitat for bighorn sheep. Golden eagles scout for prey. Palm oases dot the region, and purple and yellow Orcutt's woody asters bloom throughout.

More than 75 sites of archaeological or historic significance have been identified, including at least 10 that are eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Several parcels in the Truckhaven/Lake Cahuilla area are in private hands, while the federal government owns some of the property and the State Lands Commission controls some acreage. None of the parcels are contiguous, which makes it more difficult to coordinate management.

Not all riders are convinced, however. Tom Tammone of Irvine said off-roaders should get their money back if the state puts up keep-out signs.

“I see red flags,” he said.



SOURCE: California State Parks

BRIAN CRAGIN / Union-Tribune

The California Off-Road Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission has decided to commit more than \$1 million to buy 4,000 acres of desert next to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park.