

## **Joshua Tree National Park, Riverside sheriff seek funds to police off-roading**

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Agencies and organizations in California have submitted applications for state funding to help cover the cost of off-road management efforts. These efforts include everything from tracking off-road vehicles, hunting for illegal cannabis grows in Riverside County and patrolling off-road trails in Joshua Tree National Park.

During the cooler winter and spring seasons, millions of residents and visitors explore California's desert lands by just about every possible mode of transportation.

A particularly devoted demographic of desert rat treasures driving and riding down the jeep trail washes, the mine roads and the dirt bike single track trails that thread through the thousands of miles of desert in Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

To make sure these folks are doing so safely and legally, the California State Parks established a grant program in which more than \$30 million is up for grabs to use for maintenance, restoration, education and law enforcement related to off-road vehicle use on public lands.

Now it's the public's turn to provide feedback on the agency's plans for the money, which California residents can do through May 4 at [http://olga.ohv.parks.ca.gov/egramms\\_ohmvr/user/home.aspx](http://olga.ohv.parks.ca.gov/egramms_ohmvr/user/home.aspx). More information can be found at [ohv.parks.ca.gov](http://ohv.parks.ca.gov).

### **Incursions in Joshua Tree**

Joshua Tree National Park hosted 2.9 million visitors last year.

Residents and visitors alike know the park's 800,000 acres of largely desert wilderness is special. So do the folks that enjoy its 141 miles of dirt roads in areas like the Old Dale Mining District southeast of Twentynine Palms and Berdoo Canyon Road leading from the Indio Hills into Pleasant Valley and onto the park's popular Geology Tour Road.

That popularity brings with it some negative impacts, park officials have reported, including 708 points of illegal entry into wilderness areas not permitted for OHV use, resulting in 265 miles of illegal tracks. Three-quarters of these incursions are "located in or lead directly to designated wilderness," officials report.

From what evidence is left, officials say, the incursions span people driving on closed roads to decommissioned mines to people driving in the mud of normally dry lake beds during rare spells of wet weather.

A map of the incursions created by park officials and shared with The Desert Sun shows extensive illegal OHV use of closed roads connecting Berdoo and Thermal canyon roads near Indio, from the area of the Twentynine Palms Mountains to the Pinto Basin, and also between Morongo Valley and Desert Hot Springs.

Jane Rodgers, the park's chief of Science and Resource Stewardship, has seen the park's visitation nearly triple since the 1990s. She said that the park has excellent opportunities for people to do challenging 4x4 exploration while staying on authorized roads. Hopefully, she said, the grant will help the park continue to improve communication with visitors and prevent damage of non-renewable resources.

"It is an issue that is solvable," Rodgers said of unauthorized OHV use. "Part of our plan is to use this funding to brainstorm on how we can communicate to the public where different recreation is happening. We're hoping to get the time and resources needed to address the problem."

Park officials have submitted an application to the state requesting \$120,000 in grant funding to cover a portion of the cost to develop a treatment strategy for the illegal incursions. The application outlines that the strategy will help "educate the visiting public, prevent OHV damage in closed areas through routine patrol, signage and outreach, and engineer effective solutions through physical barriers and revegetation techniques."

### **Hammertime in Morongo Basin**

More than 100 hundred miles of Joshua Tree National Park give way to San Bernardino County land to the north and west of the park's boundaries. That land is part of the nearly 3,000 square miles of one of the nation's largest counties policed by the deputies at San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department's Morongo Basin Station in the town of Joshua Tree.

The sheriff's department has agreements with several other agencies, including the military police at the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, to cooperatively patrol and enforce the law in the areas near or even on the various federal properties.

These include the dirt roads from unincorporated Twentynine Palms, to Pioneertown, Big Bear and the Johnson Valley OHV riding area, which hosts the increasingly popular King of the Hammers offroad racing event every February.

Deputies have been busy, station administrators have reported, with a three-fold surge of OHV-related calls for service over the last several years, from approximately 450 in 2018 to 1400 in 2019, much of which occurs in the popular winter months.

To help, the department is requesting money to purchase three 2020 Ford Raptor 4X4s to patrol the remote regions popular with offroaders. When decked out with the requested emergency accessories and law enforcement gear, each truck will cost about \$65,000. The department is asking for about \$100,000 from the state to help with the purchase and another \$100,000 to help pay for staff. As the station only has one 4x4 truck that's over a decade old, deputies use their normal patrol vehicles in the dirt and can't access some of the most popular areas, like the Hammers in Johnson Valley.

"The population of the unincorporated areas the Morongo Basin Station patrols more than doubles during the month of February," their application reads. "The majority of the calls for service generated during this time period are located in off-road areas in and around Johnson Valley involving OHV's in some capacity."

The Morongo Basin application has already received positive public feedback on the state's website.

"Thanks to the OHV grant last year there has been significant progress in maintaining OHV regulations and laws," Susan Lefevre wrote. "Morongo Valley Neighborhood Watch respectfully requests that this grant be awarded in order to sustain the current progress and make sure that future illegal OHV activities are avoided."

"Continued grant funding will enable us to maintain our successful community relationship with the Morongo station OHV team and to secure gains made over the past year," Sharon Dove wrote. "We are grateful for the

concentrated support we have received from the Morongo Basin Sheriff's OHV team and ask that funding continue in order to maintain recent progress."

### **Recreating in Riverside County**

The Bureau of Land Management's field office in Palm Springs manages 1.67 million acres and over 15,000 square miles of federal land including the vast area of the Orocopia and Chuckwalla mountains south of Interstate 10 between Indio and Blythe, and portions of the Sand to Snow and Santa Rosa and San Jacinto national monuments.

These wildlands, in close proximity to Coachella Valley communities, include 14 wilderness areas and 10 areas of critical environmental concern, in addition to 2,175 miles of routes and washes open to OHV recreation.

Their OHV patrol team consists of eight rangers who often work in collaboration with deputies from the Riverside County Sheriff's Department's Riverside County Off-Highway Vehicle Enforcement Team.

ROVE is comprised of seven sheriff department personnel who utilize a fleet of six street-legal dirt bikes, nine all-terrain and utility task vehicles, and seven sport utility vehicles. The team also submitted an application for \$170,000 in state OHV funding citing 29,577 calls for service from the public regarding illegal OHV use between June 2007 and January 2020.

They are requesting funds to supplement expenses and help cover overtime costs for enforcement, training and education related to patrolling areas like Indio Hills, Painted Hills, Box Canyon, Chiriaco Summit and North Shore near the Salton Sea.

### **A growing problem around Anza**

Riverside County Sheriff's Department's Hemet Station submitted its first application for state OHV funding to help cover the growing cost of the department's efforts to fight illegal cannabis grows in the wildlands near Mount San Jacinto and the towns of Anza and Sage.

Deputies from the Hemet Sheriff's Station patrol approximately 750 square miles of mountain and desert in which they claim to be seeing "illegal marijuana growers using OHV style vehicles to travel to their grow sites."

The station is requesting approximately \$180,000 to help pay for staffing and about \$140,000 to purchase a Ford F350, two trailers, two Polaris UTVs and four Yamaha Kodiak ATVs. The funds will help them send four-person patrol teams three times a month—extra teams on holiday weekends—to continue eradicating illegal cannabis grows and the related illegal OHV activity in a patrol area where they claim 3,000 illegal grows exist.

"Station personnel have served over 250 search warrants and have recovered 233 tons of illegal marijuana," their application reads. "Hemet Station has seized over 10 illegal OHV style vehicles and have seen proof that the growers use these vehicles to travel from grow site to grow site. 88 firearms have also been seized and has become a serious officer safety issue for anyone patrolling OHV areas."

After the public comment period is closed, applicants will amend their applications if needed and receive further feedback from the state.