



United States Department of the Interior



BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

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November 17, 2010

Memorandum

To: Director

From: State Director, California 

Subject: Report on Johnson Valley Off-Highway Vehicle Incident and Review of Special Recreation Permit Program in the California Desert

I am transmitting to you the results of the findings, actions, and recommendations from our review relating to the tragic accident during the California 200 event at the BLM's Johnson Valley OHV Open Area that resulted in eight fatalities and more than a dozen injuries. All of us in BLM were stunned by the accident as there had never been a fatality under a BLM-authorized Special Recreation Permit (SRP), either of a spectator or a participant here in California. We immediately offered our condolences to the families of the victims. We continue to do so.

The report summarizes what happened, what actions we took, and are taking, to respond. It focuses on our Special Recreation Permit (SRP) program and describes the overall status of the program, including recreation staff and law enforcement support to SRP events that existed in the California Desert District prior to the accident on August 14. Not only had we never had a SRP-related fatality, but the program had never experienced any significant safety problems. This perspective is important in terms of determining appropriate short and long-term actions necessary to ensure future public safety.

The accident occurred on Saturday evening August 14. BLM law enforcement and a large number of other public safety personnel from the various jurisdictions responded quickly despite the remote location, and all are to be commended for their heroic actions at the scene. We continue to provide our full support and cooperation to the lead investigating agency, the California Highway Patrol, which is still handling the open and active investigation.

In the days that followed the accident, I chartered an initial inquiry team, composed of BLM staff with expertise in this area from across the West and Washington DC. The team was charged with making short and long-term recommendations regarding BLM OHV permit administration and to produce a written report on those findings and recommendations. The team did an excellent job and the results of their efforts are attached, as well as their recommendations.

The team's findings and recommendations are quite specific, but they made it clear that BLM did not follow our own standard procedures for permitting the event. Further, they found this situation was not limited to this particular event, but determined that adherence to these procedures was inconsistent throughout the Desert. The IIT report and its findings are cause for alarm and will require significant change in how SRPs are processed and managed in the California Desert. The report outlines the actions immediately taken as well as our longer-term plan of action.

Most important, we are in the midst of the California Desert's active OHV recreation/event season, and I tasked the California Desert District with immediately reviewing upcoming events and ensuring sufficient controls and oversight are in place to determine if events should proceed. We immediately suspended the pending permit applications from the promoter of the California 200, Mojave Desert Racing Productions.

I have impressed upon each of our managers that if our permit procedures and public safety standards cannot all be met, BLM has a responsibility to the public to deny that event. All BLM managers will be held accountable for carrying out this directive. So far, out of more than a dozen applications for events to be held post-August 14, four have been denied due to inadequate advance time and close adherence to permit procedure requirements. All authorized events occurred with appropriate BLM law enforcement and management staff oversight. This important review process is ongoing and its full effect on SRP events in the future is unknown.

I also directed the District Manager and staff to do a thorough evaluation of the long-term outlook for the program and make recommendations on improvements. The outcome of that effort also is summarized in the report. In addition, the Off-Road Business Association and others in the OHV community initiated their own efforts to help address public safety issues inherent in their sport, and assist us in stressing the importance of personal responsibility in avoiding unsafe situations and fostering a more safety-conscious environment. We appreciate their input and will continue to work with them on this important effort.

I make it clear that as State Director I am ultimately responsible for BLM management actions in California. This event happened on my watch, and I am accountable to the public to see changes are made to better ensure public safety at any authorized SRP event. I am committed, along with the other BLM managers involved here in California, to carrying out that duty.

In summary, all of us involved in OHV events in the California Desert – BLM, race promoters, participants, spectators, and the entire OHV community – should dedicate ourselves to cooperating fully to better protect the public. BLM-California has and will continue to make changes aimed at using better management oversight, safety reviews, law enforcement, public education, and other tools available to us to achieve that goal.

Attachment:

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