

Public Safety Update Morongo Basin

At the December 3rd Commission meeting, the Commission and the Division received letters from residents of Wonder Valley describing OHV conflicts and private property trespass. The Division has received additional emails and letters from these reporting parties and from other Morongo Basin residents. The Division's Public Safety Team (Superintendent John Pelonio and Supervising Rangers Kelly Claar and Vince Anibale) was assigned to investigate the complaints.

Wonder Valley is in the Morongo Basin. It is north of Twenty-nine Palms in unincorporated San Bernardino County along Amboy Road. It is roughly twenty miles by ten miles. The area is a mixture of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land, private land and state schools lands. The area is a desert landscape with a system of dirt roads. Most private property is not fenced or signed. The authorized BLM OHV routes are generally not signed.

On January 16, 2009, the team held three meetings in Wonder Valley. During these meetings, the local residents provided additional photos and documentation to illustrate their concerns.

- The first meeting was attended by representatives from the BLM, the San Bernardino Sheriff's Department (SBCSO), and San Bernardino Code Enforcement. The SBCSO officers advised that the San Bernardino County Counsel has issued a legal opinion that the Wonder Valley dirt roads are highways open only to street legal vehicles.
- The second meeting was at a local resident's home. Other residents of the county and representatives from the public agencies attended. The residents stated that the complaints are exaggerations and that they would like to continue to operate OHVs on existing roads.
- The third meeting was with two of the reporting parties and representatives of a third. The group drove around the area to show the Public Safety Team areas that have been used by OHVs in the past. No recent vehicle tracks were seen except on existing roads. The reporting parties told the team that President's Day weekend is the busiest weekend of the year. They reported that the noise and dust from OHVs made it impossible for them to stay in the area that weekend.

The team made additional contacts. A local California Highway Patrol (CHP) watch commander was contacted. He advised that the CHP does not consider the dirt roads in Wonder Valley to be highways and that these dirt roads may be used by non-street legal vehicles.

On President's Day Weekend, five State Park Peace Officers, including the Public Safety Team, were deployed in Wonder Valley. They provided public safety coverage to allow the Sheriff's Department and BLM to deploy their personnel in other locations. The weather was ideal for OHV recreation. It had rained the day before, so there was no visible airborne dust. It was clear and cool with minimal wind. The officers focused on the areas around the homes and business of the reporting parties. Officers were in the area

for about 10 hours on Saturday, February 14. One officer checked the area on the morning of February 15th.

Officers observed one non-street legal vehicle. It was an ATV being ridden at slow speed on a track on the operator's private property. The team did not see any illegal activity, so no enforcement contacts, citations or arrests were made. The reporting party residences did not appear to be occupied, so they were not contacted. Two local residents stopped by the command post and expressed appreciation for the effort.