OFF-HIGHWAY MOTOR VEHICLE RECREATION COMMISSION
Palm Desert, CA
November 19, 2026

STAFF REPORT: Ocotillo Wells SVRA Update

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SUBJECT: Introduction of New District Superintendent to Ocotillo Wells District and Informational Update Park Plans, Energy Project Planning, and 50th Anniversary Celebration

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OBJECTIVE

Staff will provide a brief introduction of the new Ocotillo Wells District Superintendent followed by an informational report on current management plan updates and partnerships.

INTRODUCTION

Ocotillo Wells District manages two State Vehicular Recreation Areas: Heber Dunes and Ocotillo Wells. 2026 marks the 50th anniversary of Ocotillo Wells SVRA's establishment. The park was created to support desert off-road recreation, while balancing the conservation of park resources. That purpose continues today, with key projects including the park's General Plan update, engagement in regional planning, and implementation of park resource management plans.

DESCRIPTION (REPORT / UPDATE)

Ocotillo Wells SVRA Updates

Ocotillo Wells SVRA was first established in 1976 in recognition of the popularity of off-roading in the desert following World War II. Through a series of acquisitions, the park has grown from its original 14,950 acres to approximately 86,238 acres, making it the largest SVRA by far. Bureau of Land Management lands are cooperatively managed through a Memorandum of Understanding, improving management consistency within park boundaries. Ocotillo Wells SVRA is also the largest open camping State Park unit, allowing dispersed camping through large sections of the park. Today, on average, over

a million annual visitors recreate in the unit, particularly between late October and early April.

Since establishment, park management has emphasized the balance of recreational opportunities with public safety, resource protection, and education. First held in 1963, the Tierra del Sol Desert Safari is one of the longest running four-wheel drive events in the nation and is hosted at Ocotillo Wells SVRA by Tierra del Sol Four Wheel Drive Club each year. The Barrel Springs Cultural Preserve was established in 1983 to protect a sensitive and significant cultural site, and the park signed a voluntary conservation agreement for the flat-tailed horned lizard in 1997. In the 1990s the desert lifeguard program was first introduced to expand medical response on busy weekends; the program was formalized in 2007 following initial success. The park's Interpretation Program was awarded the Department's Olmsted award in 2009 for its leadership and vision in connecting the park experience to park visitors. In acknowledgement of public support for a rugged and less developed park, mindful and moderate facility placement has expanded shade and restroom infrastructure in key locations. This approach has expanded public services, safety measures, interpretation programs, and resource conservation throughout the park, while maintaining recreational access and opportunities.

Ongoing Projects

- **General Plan Update**
  A General Plan for the unit was approved in 1982. At the time, the park unit was 14,950 acres and visitation was considerably smaller. A General Plan Update is in progress, which will incorporate all lands since acquired for the unit under a consistent management approach. The General Plan Update is still in progress, with opportunities for public involvement. An update will be provided by the Strategic Planning and Recreation Services Division later in the agenda.

- **Formerly Used Defense Sites (FUDS) Investigation**
  The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is conducting a remedial investigation of a Formerly Used Defense Site within Ocotillo Wells SVRA. These studies assess the presence of military debris and potential hazards to staff and visitors. Long-term, the remedial investigation will lead to a determination of what actions, if any, need to be taken to remediate the site for improving environmental conditions and public safety.

- **Regional Energy and Transmission Projects**
  Several externally proposed regional energy and transmission projects are proposed within or adjacent to Heber Dunes and Ocotillo Wells SVRAs, including the Ironwood Transmission Line, Golden Pacific Powerlink, and Truckhaven Geothermal. District staff are engaging with project proponents, lead and regulatory agencies, park user groups, California Native American Tribes, and other partners during project scoping and environmental review periods to learn more about the projects, potential park impacts, and collaborate on ways to avoid, minimize, and mitigate impacts.

- **Wildlife Habitat Protection Plan and Soil Conservation Plan**

Ocotillo Wells SVRA finalized its Soil Conservation Plan in 2026, and a draft of the Wildlife Habitat Protection Plan is in early stages of internal review. Both plans document current conditions, management objectives, planned actions, and monitoring using an adaptive management framework. The plans conserve habitat qualities utilized by special status species, including the flat-tailed horned lizard, western burrowing owl, and Le Conte's thrasher, and identify opportunities for proactive management to reduce recreational impacts. Parks California awarded the American Conservation Experience (ACE) a grant that will enable further work towards completing objectives of these resource management plans at both Heber Dunes and Ocotillo Wells SVRAs in 2026-2027.

- **50th Anniversary Celebration**
  In celebration of Ocotillo Wells SVRA's 50th anniversary, a park-led event is occurring on November 21st between 10am-2pm at the Main Street Event Center. The event is family friendly, with a few speeches commemorating the milestone, interpretive programming, informational booths, and participation from partner organizations, including Friends of Ocotillo Wells. All are welcome.

NEXT STEPS

For information only.

RECOMMENDATION

For information only.

COMMISSION ACTION(S)

For information only.