

The Salt Lake Tribune

SUNDAY, July 22, 2007

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Salt Lake Tribune, The (UT)

Date: July 12, 2007

Section: Local

Rowdy OHV crowd alleged

Patty Henetz The Salt Lake Tribune

Correction: The only hit-and-run citation for an off-highway vehicle on BLM land from 2004 through the first half of 2007 was in California. A story in Thursday's Tribune incorrectly suggested there were some in Utah. Off-road vehicle drivers are becoming a "monstrous" law enforcement problem in the West, particularly in Utah, according to a federal crime statistics analysis released Wednesday.

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, an advocacy group of current and former federal workers, crunched U.S. Bureau of Land Management off-highway vehicle crime statistics for the past four years and found that only California posted more violations than Utah.

"America needs stronger penalties to deter reckless off-roading," said Southwest PEER Director Daniel Patterson, an ecologist in Tucson, Ariz., who formerly worked with BLM. "The rangers are frustrated. They are on the front lines."

The numbers show that from 2004 through the first half of 2007, federal rangers on BLM land in Utah issued 1,336 off-road violations for reckless driving, driving under the influence of alcohol, illegal off-roading on closed trails or off-limit areas and other crimes.

But OHV advocates scoffed at the statistics, saying they reflect BLM law enforcement priorities, so naturally the numbers would skew to OHV abuses.

The violations "are more or less the only crime because there's not much crime on public lands," said Steve Jackson, president of Utah Shared Access Alliance.

"If hikers are up there committing crimes, they're not likely to get tickets because that's not where [rangers] are focusing," added long-time OHV advocate Rainer Huck, now a mayoral candidate in Salt Lake City.

The PEER report is the second pointing out OHV abuses released since the BLM reported near-riot conditions at Juab County's Little Sahara Recreation Area during the Easter holiday in April, when an estimated 35,000 people visited the dunes.

Two nights in a row, melees involving about 1,000 people each took rangers several hours to control. Rangers ejected about 200 people from Sand Mountain, where **ATV** riders are allowed to motor 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Family areas away from Sand Mountain weren't affected.

Ed Patrovsky, a PEER member who retired from BLM law enforcement after more than 15 years on the job, said his experiences as a ranger in the West were mostly confined to issuing tickets for OHV infractions and light misdemeanors. More serious encounters included vandalism, felony warrants, fights and assaults.

"I've had bottles thrown at me, things of that nature," he said. "It can be awful scary out there when you're working by yourself and there are hundreds of these people and a riot mentality can develop."

BLM statistics for 2004-2007 obtained by PEER under the Freedom of Information Act show in the five-state area of California, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico and Utah there were more than 6,600 off-road violations for hit and run, reckless driving, and other crimes, and more than 2,300 incidents of illegal off-roading on closed trails or off-limit areas.

But compared with the number of OHV users, those numbers look small to Huck. In Utah alone, he estimated that in addition to the more than 200,000 registered OHVs, there are at least that many more that aren't registered due to the expense.

Add in four-wheel drive trucks and cars, dual-sport motorcycles and other off-road vehicles and the number comes to 600,000 OHVs in Utah, Huck said.

"The BLM refuses to accept that and plan for that. Their only response is to close land," Huck said.

Jackson of the Shared Access Alliance said his group and others are working to educate OHV riders about their legal obligations.

"We feel there is an opportunity for everyone to work together and share the West, not close off any area to any one group," Jackson said. "You don't want to be the guy riding off-trail when a responsible group passes by."

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