

CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION

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**Decision Overview****California Coastal Commission****Approves Phasing Out Off-Roading at Oceano Dunes****The Park**

The California Department of Parks and Recreation operates a large State Park in southern San Luis Obispo County in the Guadalupe-Nipomo dunes complex known as Oceano Dunes. This dunes complex is part of the largest coastal dune system in the world, one that the US Fish and Wildlife Service has called the most unique and fragile ecosystem in California and ranked first on a list of habitats in need of protection. The nearly 5,000-acre Park is adjacent to the unincorporated community of Oceano and extends along eight miles of beach, shoreline and dunes, and some two miles inland. The Park provides a mix of uses including beach day use, birdwatching, horseback riding, and hiking, as well as allowing cars, trucks, and off-highway vehicles (OHVs) on the beach and in the dunes. It's the only State Park in California that allows recreational driving on the beach.

**History of Park issues**

The California Coastal Commission is a state agency that preserves and protects California's coast and ocean for the public. In 1982, the Commission issued a coastal permit to State Parks that temporarily authorized operations at Oceano Dunes. The Commission periodically reviews the permit and found that off-roading degraded the environmentally sensitive dune habitat, harmed and occasionally killed endangered birds, and created dust plumes that cause air quality and public health issues to downwind communities. Turning a beach into a vehicular roadway also made it difficult for the public to walk, swim, and enjoy other activities at the beach. The Commission required State Parks to address these issues in 2019, directing the agency to reduce vehicle activities and evaluate phasing out OHV use. In response, State Parks released a draft plan in late 2021 detailing how they would like to continue managing the Park, which included continued vehicular and OHV use.

The Commission's vote

On March 18, 2021, the Commissioners voted unanimously to phase out OHV use, bringing an end to the decades long debate over what is allowable in this environmentally sensitive habitat area. Ultimately, the Commissioners found that vehicular recreation violated the environmental laws they are charged with upholding. Tribal and environmental justice issues, as well as air quality impacts also contributed to the decision. The Commissioners voted to phase out off-roading within three years by 2024, to immediately ban night driving and vehicular crossings of Arroyo Grande Creek, and to close the secondary Pier Avenue vehicular entrance in Oceano by July 2022. The Commission also voted to allow car camping and vehicular beach use (including for ADA access)

over a mile-long stretch of beach between West Grand and Pier Avenues where the habitat is less environmentally sensitive. The 12-hour hearing included about 180 speakers, including OHV enthusiasts, politicians, government agencies, environmentalists, Tribal representatives, and environmental justice stakeholders. While the Park will eventually be closed to off-roading in 2024, fans of this activity will continue to be able to ride at eight other inland State Parks that allow vehicular recreation, as well as at nearly 70 other public OHV areas in California.

Environmental Justice and Tribal Issues

Tribal leaders of the Northern Chumash and the Yak Tityu Tityu Yak Tilhini Tribe of indigenous Northern Chumash wanted to end vehicular recreation to allow sacred ancestral lands to heal. In addition, the marginalized communities of Oceano, Nipomo, Guadalupe, and Santa Maria have for decades endured the burdens of vehicular recreation at the Park. Air quality regulators determined the primary reason for the dust problems in their communities was vehicular activity continuously damaging the dunes, grinding the sand into finer and finer particles, and causing large plumes that can deposit dust over 12 miles inland. The affected communities identify anywhere from nearly half to as much as 90% Hispanic and Latino with higher rates of poverty compared to other parts of the region. In the case of Oceano, which is closest to the Park, residents have dealt with poor air quality, increased crime, noise, and an inability to walk or swim at their beach because of the vehicles. A survey of Park visitors indicates those benefiting from this kind of vehicle recreational access are generally wealthier and whiter than the nearby underserved communities of color enduring the burdens. The Commission's environmental justice analysis determined that the intermittent recreation benefits to one group does not justify the sustained burdens to these underserved communities.

Will the Park Be Closed?

The Commission's decision will not close Oceano Dunes. It will enable the Commission to partner with State Parks, the local community, and visitors to the area to reimagine the Park operating in more environmentally sustainable and legally consistent way. The Park would continue to offer unique experiences such as car camping on the beach, and a range of other activities, from walking and swimming, to horseback riding, birding, and hiking the dunes. The new plan would:

- Provide a new unique low-cost car camping experience and continued vehicular ADA access between West Grand and Pier Avenues. This area is closer to Pismo Beach, Grover Beach, and Oceano businesses and would allow campers to walk, visit, and shop in those areas.
- Continue to provide non-vehicular public recreational access south of Pier Avenue to allow for beach day use. Pier Avenue would close to vehicular entry by summer of 2022, and State Parks would explore the potential for future low-intensity recreational opportunities such as hike-in or bike-in camping further south.
- Implement enhanced habitat protection measures, including in the southern portion of the Park, and near Oso Flaco Lake.
- Enable the underserved community of Oceano to more directly connect to the beach outside their doors. This will potentially bring with it the types of opportunities that have helped other California beach towns, such as neighboring Pismo which ended off-roading on its beach, prosper.