



Ocotillo Wells

STATE VEHICULAR RECREATION AREA
General Plan



WORKING PAPER #3 DRAFT ISSUES AND ANALYSIS

Ocotillo Wells SVRA General Plan Update and EIR

DECEMBER 2013

The content contained herein is a work in progress,
is part of a deliberative process, and is predecisional.



The planning assumptions and key planning issues influencing the planning effort for the Ocotillo Wells State Vehicular Recreation Area (SVRA) General Plan are captured within Working Paper #3. These issues were identified through extensive existing conditions research, public outreach efforts, and discussions with Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation (OHMVR) Division and Ocotillo Wells SVRA managers and staff. While many issues have been identified during the process of updating the Ocotillo Wells SVRA General Plan, this document focuses on the issues of primary importance that will drive the planning efforts.

PLANNING ASSUMPTIONS

The following planning assumptions are rooted in California State Parks (CSP) policy, core program initiatives, and statewide planning issues, which form the planning context and parameters for addressing Ocotillo Wells SVRA General Plan issues.

- Ocotillo Wells SVRA will remain an area dedicated to off-highway vehicle (OHV) recreation and related recreational opportunities, and will continue to be managed as such.
- A “study area” was defined to provide a comprehensive management perspective for all lands within or adjacent to Ocotillo Wells SVRA, regardless of ownership or planning status. Only land owned or directly managed by Ocotillo Wells SVRA would be subject to the General Plan Update.
- CSP will continue to provide educational programs, trail guidance, and enforcement efforts that enhance OHV recreational opportunities while conserving, restoring, and protecting natural, cultural, and physical resources at Ocotillo Wells SVRA.
- CSP will continue collaborative planning efforts with local, state, and federal agencies, as well as regional and local partners to address land and resource management objectives.

PLANNING ISSUES

Planning Issue #1: The large size, extreme terrain, and rugged character of Ocotillo Wells SVRA provide a unique visitor experience, but also present an ongoing management challenge.

With more than 85,000 acres of expansive desert available for recreation, Ocotillo Wells SVRA offers many different opportunities for public use. However, the vast desert landscape makes the provision and maintenance of signage, basic facilities and enforcement in many of the most remote areas challenging. Access to Ocotillo Wells SVRA is not restricted to designated access points, and visitors can easily enter from many uncontrolled points from State Route (SR) 78, SR-86, and S22. Ocotillo Wells SVRA rangers cannot have a constant presence in all areas of the rugged desert, but do patrol regularly. Visitors are expected to recreate responsibly, and must be prepared to handle unexpected conditions in the harsh climate. When emergency situations occur, visitors may have trouble requesting assistance because reception on cellular phones is not guaranteed. In addition, the entities that provide emergency response services (including other agencies or companies besides CSP) can have difficulty reaching visitors.



Planning Issue #2: Ocotillo Wells SVRA is a unique destination for OHV recreation in Southern California.

There are a limited number of destinations that offer OHV recreation in the region, despite the widespread popularity of OHV recreation in Southern California. Ocotillo Wells SVRA provides one of the largest contiguous areas used primarily for OHV recreation. The unique opportunities for legacy open riding and trail riding through the vast desert landscape, the variety of terrain types and topographic features, and the challenges for OHV recreation enthusiasts of all types and expertise make Ocotillo Wells SVRA a

premier destination for OHV recreation. Many families and groups of friends make regular trips to Ocotillo Wells SVRA. Groups will often circle their “wagons” (recreational vehicles) and congregate around a central camp area. Many visitors enjoy camping and riding in the same destination each time they visit, and continue to return because it is a special place vested with meaning and memories.

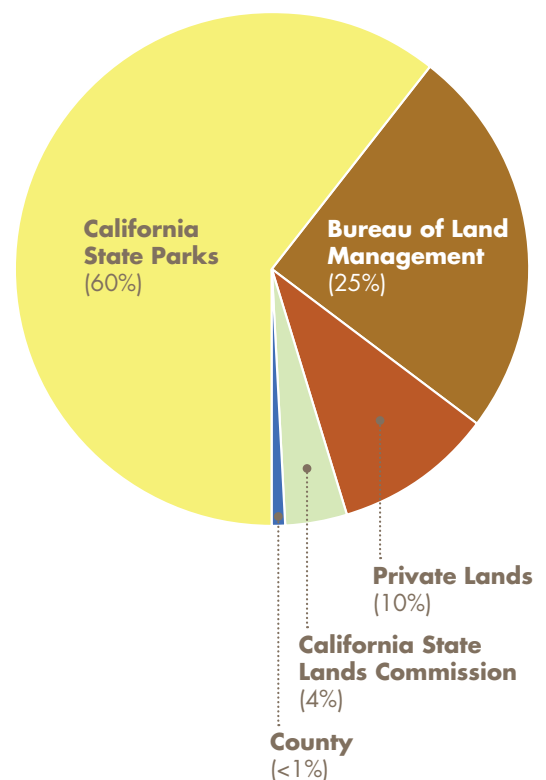
Planning Issue #3: The connection between Ocotillo Wells SVRA and the local community is important.

Many of the businesses in the communities of Ocotillo Wells, Borrego Springs, and Salton City cater to the visitors of Ocotillo Wells SVRA by offering essential goods and services (e.g., gasoline and food). Many businesses also provide services that expand recreational opportunities by offering OHV rentals and lodging. In turn, visitors help support the local economies.



Planning Issue #4: Comprehensive management is a challenge as a result of complex land ownership within Ocotillo Wells SVRA.

The pattern of land ownership in Ocotillo Wells SVRA, as with much of the desert land in California, is complex. While CSP owns most of the land within the boundary of Ocotillo Wells SVRA, due to the checkerboard ownership, other inholdings are owned by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), California State Lands Commission (CSLC), Imperial County, and various private owners. The boundaries of land ownership are not apparent to visitors, and recreation patterns largely function independent of the distinctions in land ownership. Updating the Ocotillo Wells SVRA General Plan is one way CSP is working to provide a comprehensive management solution. CSP has continued to manage BLM-owned land within Ocotillo Wells SVRA through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that was last updated in 2008. CSP retains all authority to manage land that it owns within Ocotillo Wells SVRA.



Planning Issue #5: There are multiple land management plans and policies that apply to certain areas within and adjacent to Ocotillo Wells SVRA.

In addition to the applicable plans and policies of CSP, some of the lands within Ocotillo Wells SVRA are covered by multiple land management plans that have been prepared by BLM, the County of San Diego, and the County of Imperial. In general, the plans are compatible; however, specific parts of some of the plans may be in conflict. The extent of conflict is somewhat unclear due to complex land ownership arrangements, multiple land managers, and variability in the way different agencies apply certain land management policies. The Ocotillo Wells SVRA General Plan

update will provide a comprehensive land management plan for the area that, in practice, functions as a contiguous area from a visitor's perspective.

Bureau of Land Management

BLM's primary land management plan, the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) Plan, was originally adopted in 1980. The CDCA Plan designated land within the California desert with a "multiple-use class" designation that would guide allowable uses, including OHV recreation on BLM-owned land. Areas covered by the CDCA Plan (1980) within Ocotillo Wells SVRA have also been the subject of multiple amendments to the CDCA Plan (1980), including the following:

- "Arroyo Salado Open Area" (1993): An amendment to the multiple-use designations in the CDCA Plan (1980) for a portion of BLM-owned lands within Ocotillo Wells SVRA from a designation of Multiple Use Class I to Multiple Use Class M.
- Western Colorado (WECO) Desert Routes of Travel Designations (2002): An amendment to the CDCA Plan (1980) that focuses on managing OHV recreation in the western Colorado Desert area, a small area that includes Ocotillo Wells SVRA. Within the updated CDCA Plan, areas within Ocotillo Wells SVRA are designated as "open riding areas." This amendment updates and supersedes the CDCA Plan (1980). WECO designates routes of travel and areas where cross-country travel or open areas are allowed on BLM-owned land.



Renewable Energy Conservation (DRECP)

BLM, in collaboration with other state and federal agencies, is currently working to prepare the DRECP that will change the land management plans and applicable policies, and could affect OHV recreation.

Truckhaven Geothermal Leasing Area

A Record of Decision for a final environmental impact statement was issued by BLM in 2008 to allow for geothermal exploration and development within the Truckhaven Geothermal Leasing Area, much of which is contained within Ocotillo Wells SVRA.

Anza-Borrego Desert State Park

The Anza-Borrego Desert State Park and Ocotillo Wells SVRA share an extensive boundary. Because of the different missions of the two parks, recreation is also managed differently, as reflected in their respective general plans, park regulations, signage, and maps.

Planning Issue #6: The General Plan for Ocotillo Wells SVRA needs updating because of the changes that have occurred in the 30 years since it was approved.

The existing General Plan for Ocotillo Wells SVRA was first adopted in 1982. Since then, there have been several large land acquisitions and management agreements that significantly increased the size of Ocotillo Wells SVRA. In addition, there have been many changes in OHV recreation, such as new, more powerful vehicle types and an increased prevalence of recreational vehicles. Changes in the operational environment for OHV recreation in the region have also necessitated an updated comprehensive plan for Ocotillo Wells SVRA.

Planning Issue #7: Special events are popular at Ocotillo Wells SVRA.

Many special events occur at Ocotillo Wells SVRA, usually during the peak season. These events can draw large crowds and involve a central area where people camp. Music, temporary concessions, vehicle testing, military



training, and OHV rides are common for these events. Some special events at Ocotillo Wells SVRA require special event permits that need administrative approval. These events require substantial effort by Ocotillo Wells SVRA staff for review, approval, and management.



Planning Issue #8: Physical resources are a primary contributor to the unique recreation experience of Ocotillo Wells SVRA.

Although generally flat, there are many topographical variations in Ocotillo Wells SVRA. The terrain is punctuated by mud hills, escarpments, and washes, and these features serve as destinations for visitors engaging in OHV recreation. They also aid in navigation and often help define a location for camping. Ensuring that these features remain accessible in the long term is important for visitors, and will require addressing focused management in areas with erosive soils. This will help protect natural hydrologic flows and locations where scarce water resources are present.

Air quality effects are a regional concern in Imperial County. Dust carried by strong desert winds is common. While the majority of land disturbance in Imperial County can be attributed to agriculture, the Imperial County Air Pollution Control District (APCD) has identified OHV use as a possible contributing factor to air quality concerns. The OHMVR Division prepared a Dust Control Plan for Ocotillo Wells SVRA in coordination with the Imperial County APCD. The Dust Control Plan will be updated biennially.

Planning Issue #9: The rich and varied history is fundamental to the identity of Ocotillo Wells SVRA, and necessitates ongoing surveying and may require targeted protection.

In addition to the enduring legacy of OHV recreation, Ocotillo Wells SVRA also experienced a period of intense uses by military training and oil exploration. Some artifacts of these historical land uses remain throughout Ocotillo Wells SVRA. In addition, there were thriving communities of native people within and around Ocotillo Wells SVRA. Significant cultural and prehistoric resources, including artifacts, shards, and sacred sites, have been documented in Ocotillo Wells SVRA. Many resources are clustered around the shoreline of Ancient Lake Cahuilla, which covered much of the Imperial Valley at one time.

Planning Issue #10: Many different types of habitats in Ocotillo Wells SVRA help sustain diverse wildlife.

People may perceive the desert as a place that is lifeless; however, there are many natural resources that provide visual interest, unique riding destinations points, wayfinding assistance, and ecological value. Vegetation is sparse in many areas of Ocotillo Wells SVRA. Some of this is due to the types of naturally barren habitat communities that are present, while other areas may have become barren as a result of historical uses or intensive OHV recreation. Although most of the habitat communities within Ocotillo Wells SVRA can continue to exist within areas where OHV recreation occurs, there are some sensitive communities such as mesquite dunes that require specialized management and protection. Some habitat communities within Ocotillo Wells SVRA are relatively pristine and will likely remain that way without management intervention.



Many species of wildlife thrive in Ocotillo Wells SVRA and are supported by different habitat communities. Ocotillo Wells SVRA provides a number of unique water sources and wildlife corridors and connections for a variety of wildlife species. Some sensitive and rare species, such as the flat-tailed horned lizard, have been identified within Ocotillo Wells SVRA, and require regular monitoring and adaptive programs to protect them.

Planning Issue #11: Seasonal and annual fluctuation in visitation necessitates resourceful staffing solutions.

Ocotillo Wells SVRA draws on resources from other state parks to supplement staffing during the peak season. While the peak season for many of the state parks is summer, it is the opposite for Ocotillo Wells SVRA, where the peak season is typically from Halloween to Presidents Day weekend (October through February). Partnerships with organizations have also helped to augment the capacity of Ocotillo Wells SVRA to manage large numbers of people. Associations like the Friends of Ocotillo Wells provide vital program assistance and volunteers to Ocotillo Wells SVRA and its visitors. Emergency response providers help to respond to medical emergencies. Housing is currently provided for some staff members, and is important for on-site emergencies and retaining staff due to the remote location of Ocotillo Wells SVRA.

Planning Issue #12: Emerging OHV technology may change the character of recreation in Ocotillo Wells SVRA.

The types of OHVs that are available in the marketplace continues to change. Electric vehicles are emerging, and other innovative technologies are expected to emerge. Technology can also provide new tools to support management in Ocotillo Wells SVRA. The online

environment is a primary way of accessing information about the available recreation opportunities and ongoing management topics. In addition, mobile technologies may become available for individual or aggregated data collection, management, and analysis of recreation patterns. Many visitors regularly use GPS technology to navigate and for geocaching in Ocotillo Wells SVRA.

Planning Issue #13: Informing and involving visitors, stakeholder groups, and clubs is essential to the long-term success of Ocotillo Wells SVRA.

Communicating information about rules and regulations, while explaining the reason why changes or closures have occurred are critical. During initial public outreach efforts, visitors often complained that they were surprised when a change was made, and that there was not a clear explanation about why changes were made. Ocotillo Wells SVRA has been able to leverage partnerships to help enhance and expand visitor experiences.

Planning Issue #14: Visitors are expected to recreate responsibly.

To ensure that the unique natural, cultural, and physical resources are available for future generations to enjoy, visitors are expected to follow all applicable rules and regulations in good faith. Visitors are also encouraged to recreate responsibly to minimize the inherent risk of OHV recreation that they assume when visiting Ocotillo Wells SVRA. This also helps reduce user conflicts between different types of recreationists. Tread Lightly principles are promoted as a way to minimize impacts to the land.





Planning Issue #15: Interpretation and education programs are an essential part of visiting Ocotillo Wells SVRA.

One of the primary ways visitors experience Ocotillo Wells SVRA is through the park's Interpretation and Education Program. The program not only provides visitors with a wide array of high-quality interpretive programming and recreation-based interpretive activities, it also provides Ocotillo Wells SVRA guests with interpretive facilities such as the Discovery Center and amphitheater, way-finding signage, interpretive wayside exhibits, and important interpretive and informational publications. Through its Interpretation and Education Program, Ocotillo Wells SVRA has deepened visitor understanding and protection of resources, improved visitor safety and rule compliance, further developed the connection between visitors and Ocotillo Wells SVRA, all of which are critical components of the OHMVR Division Mission Statement.

Planning Issue #16: Fiscal pressures will continue to present new challenges and different solutions for providing OHV recreation at Ocotillo Wells SVRA.

The cost commitment of operating and maintaining Ocotillo Wells SVRA is interwoven with the charge to provide a premiere destination for OHV recreation, while maintaining its unique natural, physical, and cultural resources. The OHMVR Division recently experienced a decline in OHV Trust Funds provided through the annual state budget process. Moving forward, such declines can create more pressure to generate revenue on site, bringing into consideration use of permanent and mobile concessions, along with other fee based alternatives.

Planning Issue #17: Decisions on management of permanent and temporary concessions at Ocotillo Wells SVRA are an important consideration for the future of Ocotillo Wells SVRA.

There are no permanent concession facilities or services provided in Ocotillo Wells SVRA. Currently, the delivery of recreational vehicle (RV) rentals to Ocotillo Wells SVRA is permitted and is considered a temporary concession service. During special events, limited concessions such as food sales and OHV repairs and parts are managed and provided by event organizers. Private concessions outside of Ocotillo Wells SVRA offer a variety of goods and services for visitors, including food, lodging, camping, OHV accessories, and ATV rentals. Also, private companies rent RVs that can be delivered and picked up on location. Future opportunities with the private sector and non-profit groups are a possibility, but would need coordination with Ocotillo Wells SVRA staff and the provider to ensure adequate management of the recreation experience, resources, and operations.

The key planning issues identified in Working Paper #3 are not intended to be an exhaustive list, but rather, a compilation of the key issues identified through extensive existing conditions research, public outreach efforts, and discussions with the OHMVR Division and Ocotillo Wells SVRA managers and staff.



Moving forward with the planning process, the issues identified in Working Paper #3 will be used as tools in the development of alternatives for the General Plan. These “Draft Alternatives” will be presented in Working Paper #4. Further analyses and resolution of the issues will lead to management actions identified as “Goals” and “Guidelines” in the General Plan.