

Imperial Valley Press

THE SOURCE FOR NEWS

GATEWAY TO IMPERIAL COUNTY

50 CEN

November 21, 2003

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Law enforcement important for safe experience in the dunes

Thanksgiving weekend in the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area is eagerly awaited by tens of thousands of visitors. But in recent years, this weekend has turned unpleasant for many in our community.

Imperial County each winter hosts hundreds of thousands of off-highway vehicle recreational visitors from Southern California and Arizona. The federally-managed Imperial Sand Dunes is one of the most heavily visited OHV recreation areas in the country. However, the sheer volume of visitors that come to the dunes on holiday weekends had proved to be way beyond the ability of the federal Bureau of Land Management by itself to enforce laws and maintain a safe environment.

But now, local, state and federal government law enforcement agencies have formed a strong partnership to improve the experience for visitors — especially during the busiest weekends, such as Thanksgiving. Further, a grassroots movement of OHV-riders flies checkered flags on their vehicles to support

law enforcement and to show that they act responsibly.

Earlier this year, the Imperial County Sheriff's Office submitted a \$1 million grant request to the California Off Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission for OHV-related law enforcement efforts in the county. About half of the county's request was to fund a continuation of the heavy law enforcement presence at the Imperial Sand Dunes during peak holiday periods. This money would also enable sheriff's deputies to increase their ability to monitor and enforce vehicular use in wilderness areas and other environmentally-sensitive areas.

I believe it is extremely urgent that Sheriff Carter receive the full amount of the state grant request for law enforcement and related equipment. The commission, which will make its funding decision in December, has received over \$40 million in requests this year, but will only be able to make \$17 million available in grants. The state is working under tight budget constraints, but I

have urged the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission to approve the county's request for the sake of public safety and to ensure a higher level of protection of environmentally sensitive areas in Imperial County.

Last year, I was successful in obtaining a federal funding appropriation for better BLM law enforcement in the dunes. I have again obtained supplemental money in fiscal year 2004. Even with these additional federal dollars, it is essential that the sheriff be funded at a level necessary to provide the kind of intensive law enforcement that is needed to maintain law and order during heavy use.

We must keep the dunes as a fun, family, recreational environment for all to enjoy. I encourage everyone who visits the dunes to stay safe, ride responsibly, and have a healthy, happy Thanksgiving.

BOB FILNER
Congressman
Chula Vista