

Clear Creek study -- asbestos dangers can be prevented

Connor Ramey, Hollister Free Lance, 4-5-11

A new study, funded and promoted by the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division in California, has called into question the dangers of asbestos exposure in Clear Creek Management Area.

The Bureau of Land Management closed the popular OHV recreation park in 2008 out of fears of asbestos exposure from serpentine rock. The exposure exceeded the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's threshold of 1 in 10,000-to-1 in one million, according to the original study.

Since that time, OHV advocates have expressed a desire for the land to be reopened and go back to status quo. Holding rallies in front of the BLM Hollister branch office, and sending letters to a constant stream of public officials, enthusiasts wanted the public land back.

The new study released on March 22 outlines possible ways to still use the area but avoid the asbestos dangers. The document restricts usage to the "wet" months and creates a distance of more than 20 feet between riders.

If some things are done, the exposure is limited, the report shows.

"There is clearly an opportunity to allow OHV recreation in CCMA," according to the study.

The intention of the document was not to invalidate the previous study, done by the United States Environmental Protection Agency in 2008, but to act as a supplemental document, said Phil Jenkins, chief of the off-road divisions in California.

The 70-plus page report is a smaller study and document than the previous one and it focuses on creating a plan to avoid asbestos so at some level the park can remain open for recreation, Jenkins said.

"That's a key point there - I want to make something clear: This is not a study that invalidates the EPA one," he said. "This is just more information to help the BLM make a decision."

Unlike the previous EPA study, the commissioned study "made efforts" to reduce the overall exposure, according to the document.

"The IERF (International Environmental Research Foundation) study made an effort to have the trailing motorcycle rider ride in such a way as to avoid or minimize exposure to dust generated by the lead rider," the report continues. "This may not have been practiced during the other earlier studies as neither stated any steps were taken to minimize asbestos exposure."

In the EPA study, which was started in 2004 and released in 2009, researchers did not set forth plans to avoid asbestos. Riders trailed lead riders closely, driving into asbestos-filled dust clouds. In the IERF study, trailers kept their distance and were told to avoid dust clouds.

The report also limits the usage of each rider to five days a year and eight hours per day.

The measures greatly reduced the riders' exposure, the report concludes.

"The safe riding practices described above, along with not riding when the conditions are very dry, are likely

reasons for the markedly lower exposures to both airborne asbestos and total dust in the IERF study," according to the report.

With the new results and information, BLM Hollister Manager Rick Cooper said the office is looking at the information and awaiting a response from the EPA.

"We will certainly consider the information," he said.

He realized the importance of the document because it shows that you can lower exposure.

"That's the reason why it was done," he said. "It's going to be supplemental information that definitely will help us."

The study was done in conjunction with the BLM, Jenkins said. The management agency knew the OHV commission was doing a study and its intentions.

"They knew we were doing this," Jenkins said. "We wanted to flesh out some information and see what can be done to still have some sort of recreation there."

The information shows that the levels were well below the EPA's study two years ago - and below the asbestos threshold.

The report showed there would be 0.18 deaths per one million riders per year because of exposure to asbestos.

"The risk is similar to the lifetime risk of death for smoking less than one cigarette over the same one-year period," according to the report. "Other recreational activities, such as swimming, hiking, and snow skiing are over a 100-fold dangerous."

The BLM is still in the final stages of completing its Resource Management Plan, and choosing what to do with the large piece of land. The draft environmental impact statement listed a series of alternatives that ranged from reopening Clear Creek to what it once was or to close it for good.

The report is expected to be finished during the summer.

County Supervisor Margie Barrios, who has been a outspoken supporter of the OHV users, believes the new report shows that the park should be reopened to status quo.

"For San Benito County, I have disagreed with the EPA and the BLM's decision to close Clear Creek. I hope this report opens it up," she said. "I'm glad it's going in a different direction."

Barrios believes that the report gives momentum to the OHV advocates, and the park will be opened soon.

"I hope the BLM will take it (the report) and look at it objectively and choose an alternative that will allow people to go out there and recreate," she said. "It's our land."

Jenkins hopes the report will allow the possibility for more research within Clear Creek regardless of the BLM's ultimate decision.

"This was a small sample size," he said. "Hopefully, the evidence will allow the BLM to leave open a door for us to do more research once they make their decision."