

CALIFORNIA COASTAL COMMISSION

455 MARKET STREET, SUITE 300
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94105-2421
VOICE (415) 904-5200
FAX (415) 904-5400



Project Overview

California Coastal Commission to Consider New Activities 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. The 3,500-acre Park extends along eight miles of beach, shoreline, and dunes, and some two miles inland, fronting the underserved community of Oceano. The Park currently provides a mix of uses including beach day use, birdwatching, horseback riding, and hiking, but the primary draw at the Park is driving 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 and in the dunes.



Park issues

The California Coastal Commission issued a coastal permit to State Parks in the 1980s for operations at Oceano Dunes, and periodically reviews and updates that permit. The Commission found that driving at the Park has degraded dune habitats, harmed native species, caused air quality and public health issues, and made it difficult for the public to walk, swim and enjoy other activities at the beach. The Commission required State Parks to address these concerns when it last reviewed the permit in 2019. Among other things, the Commission directed State Parks to consider reducing driving activities that contribute to these problems, and to evaluate phasing out OHV use altogether. In response, State Parks prepared a draft plan detailing how they would like to continue managing the Park (available at www.oceanoduneswp.com/en/documents/draft-eir). That plan proposes to maintain and even expand vehicular and OHV use, including new campgrounds, OHV related facilities and new OHV access to the Park near Oso Flaco Lake and at the Phillips 66 site. The Commission is reviewing this plan and is scheduled to hold a virtual public hearing on these matters on March 18, 2021.

Why is this Coastal Commission meeting important?

The Commission is a state government agency that preserves and protects California's coast and ocean for the public. It does this by looking at how development affects the environment and coastal access. Agency staff make recommendations to a voting board of Commissioners, who make the final decision on proposals. In this case, the tentative staff recommendation for the March 18th hearing is to phase out off-roading over five years and to expand different types of recreational uses that won't harm coastal resources at the Park. The staff recommendation encourages car-camping on the beach between West Grand and Pier Avenues, as well as some remote hike-in/bike-in camping. Off-roading enthusiasts 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.

Expected outcomes under the staff recommendation

The staff recommendation would not close Oceano Dunes. Rather, it would 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 at the beach to horseback riding, birding and hiking the dunes. Under the new plan, the Park would:

- Provide a unique \$10 per campsite car camping experience and vehicular ADA access between West Grand and Pier Avenues
- Provide non-vehicular public recreational access south of Pier Avenue to allow for beach day use, equestrian use, biking, hiking, birdwatching, fishing and other activities. This would close Pier Avenue to vehicular entry, and provide some low-intensity hike-in/bike-in camping opportunities further south
- Implement enhanced habitat protection measures, including in the southern portion of the Park, and near Oso Flaco Lake.

The staff recommendation would initially increase beach/vehicular camping space, and then after the 5-year transition provide roughly the same amount of camping space currently available at the Park but move it further north. The camping would then be closer to Pismo Beach, Grover Beach, and Oceano businesses near West Grand and Pier Avenues, allowing campers to walk, visit, and shop in those areas. Closing the Pier Avenue vehicle ramp will enable the underserved community of Oceano to directly connect to its beach, which could bring with it the types of opportunities that help other California beach towns prosper. These changes could lead to adverse impacts to existing businesses catering primarily to OHV uses, but there would also be expanded opportunities for businesses catering to lower-impact beach and dune uses. Oceano Dunes would continue to be a Park that is attractive for visitors, particularly for families looking for unique lower-cost recreational and outdoor opportunities in the five cities area.

Why is public participation important?

It is important that the Coastal Commission hear the public's vision for the future of the Park. That includes community leaders, business owners, elected representatives, residents and visitors. Previous Coastal Commission hearings on the Park have drawn a majority of speakers with strong single-issue views such as those who support OHV use and those who oppose it. While these views are important, the upcoming hearing is also an opportunity for the people to comment on what they want to see for the Park and its future more broadly. Whether those opinions support the staff recommendation or oppose it, we encourage everyone's participation. As indicated above, the Coastal Commission is expected to make an important decision on the future of the Park on March 18, 2021, and now is the time to provide your input, whether by sending in comments in writing or by testifying at the virtual hearing on March 18th, or both.

How to participate

- Submit comments by email to OceanoDunesReview@coastal.ca.gov
- Submit comments by mail to 725 Front Street, Suite 300, Santa Cruz, CA 95060
- Speak to the Commissioners on March 18, 2021 using your telephone, cell phone, computer or tablet. Instructions to do so are on the Commission's webpage: <https://www.coastal.ca.gov/>
- For questions, contact Kevin Kahn, Central Coast District Supervisor at 831-427-4863 or kevin.kahn@coastal.ca.gov