

Date of Hearing: April 6, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION

Lori D. Wilson, Chair

AB 1756 (Jeff Gonzalez) – As Amended March 9, 2026

SUBJECT: Off-highway vehicle recreation: City of Needles

SUMMARY: Extends the sunset of an existing off-highway motor vehicle (OHV) “combined use” highway pilot project in the City of Needles by five years. Specifically, **this bill:**

- 1) Extends by five years to January 1, 2033, an OHV “combined use” highway pilot project in the City of Needles (City) for purposes of linking existing OHV trails on federal lands and connecting OHV recreational areas with service and lodging facilities in order to create a unified system of OHV trails, preserve traffic safety, improve natural resource protection, reduce off-highway vehicle trespass on private land, and minimize impacts on city residents.
- 2) Extends by five years to January 1, 2032, two reports due to the Legislature on the safety and effectiveness of the pilot and any impacts to natural or cultural resources.
- 3) Provides that any “combined use” highways appropriately designated by the City under the pilot first created by AB 2152 (Smith), Chapter 185, Statutes of 2022 remain valid and effective for the extended duration of the pilot pursuant to this bill.

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Establishes the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) to administer and manage the state park system, including state vehicular recreation areas, which provide OHV recreational opportunities. (Public Resources Code §§501, 5001, 5008, and 5090.43)
- 2) Defines an OHV to be a motorcycle, snowmobile, sand/dune buggy, all-terrain vehicle, jeep, or other vehicles as specified. (Vehicle Code §30812)
- 3) Defines highway as “a way or place of whatever nature, publicly maintained and open to the use of the public for purposes of vehicular travel. Highway includes street”. (VEH §360)
- 4) Establishes OHV rules and regulations of the “off-road” including those governing registration, license, speed, safety, age, unauthorized access, reckless driving, compliance with, for example, signage, environmental protection, and anti-littering requirements. Any operator of an OHV must be able to reach and operate all controls necessary to safely operate the OHV. (VEH §§38280-38321)
- 5) Authorizes a local entity, DPR or a federal agency to designate a highway or a portion of a highway of three miles or less for “combined use” by a registered OHV for purposes of connecting, for example, OHV trail segments or an OHV recreational area to a service or lodging facility if the highway can also safely accommodate regular vehicle traffic. (VEH §38026)
- 6) Prior to the designation of a “combined use” highway, requires a local entity, the Director of Parks and Recreational or a federal agency to first notify the Commissioner of the California

Highway Patrol (CHP) and prohibits a designation in which the CHP determines would constitute a potential safety hazard. (VEH §38026)

- 7) Authorizes the above entities to promulgate necessary rules and regulations and install appropriate signage, as approved by the Department of Transportation (Caltrans). A “combined use” designation is only effective upon installation of such signage. (VEH §38026)
- 8) Permits a registered OHV with an appropriate license plate to be operated on a local or state two-lane highway but only to cross the highway; an OHV may cross a highway with more than two lanes but only a place designated by Caltrans or a local authority. (VEH §38025)
- 9) Prohibits an OHV to be operated on a combined-use highway under the following circumstances:
 - a) During the hours of darkness;
 - b) On a highway that does not have an operational stoplight;
 - c) Without rubber tires; and,
 - d) Without a valid driver’s license of the appropriate class and insurance. (VEH §38026.5)
- 10) Until January 1, 2028, authorizes the City of Needles to create a pilot project to designate “combined-use” highways on city roads, with the concurrence of the CHP, for a total of no more than 10 miles per highway segment for purposes of linking existing OHV trails, trailheads, and services to Bureau of Land Management or United States Forest Service lands. Provides that the pilot is intended to provide a unified system of trails for OHVs, preserve traffic safety, improve natural resource protection, reduce off-highway vehicle trespass on private land, and minimize impacts on city residents (VEH §38026.2).
- 11) Requires the City of Needles to submit two reports to the Legislature by January 1, 2027:
 - a) The first report, to be prepared in consultation with CHP, Caltrans, and the DPR, requires an evaluation of the safety and effectiveness of the pilot, including its impact on traffic flows, safety, and OHV usage on existing trails; and,
 - b) The second report, to be prepared in consultation with Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Mojave Desert Air Quality Management District, requires an evaluation of any impacts on cultural resources and archaeological sites, streambed modifications and water quality impacts, impacts on wildlife and aquatic habitat, native plants, traffic, particulate pollution, and noise. (VEH §38026.2)
- 12) Authorizes DPR to conduct, until January 1, 2030, an OHV “combined-used” pilot project at Red Rock Canyon State Park for no more than 10 miles per highway segment subject to the same or similar conditions as the City of Needles pilot project (VEH §38026.3).

FISCAL EFFECT: According to the Assembly Appropriations Committee analysis of AB 2152 (Smith), Chapter 185, Statutes of 2022, which created the pilot, absorbable costs to CHP, Caltrans, Department of Fish and Wildlife and State Parks to consult on the report to evaluate the pilot program.

COMMENTS: *According to the author.* “AB 1756 is necessary to extend the City of Needles’ Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Pilot Program to January 1, 2033, to allow meaningful evaluation of its safety, environmental, and economic outcomes. The Legislature has recognized Needles as a remote, rural, and disadvantaged community of approximately 5,200 residents, geographically isolated by over 140 miles of desert and surrounded by heavily used federal recreation lands. Tourism is a primary economic driver, and the pilot was designed to create a unified, regulated system linking federal trails to lodging, fuel, and local businesses, supporting the local economy while reducing trespass and unmanaged access.

Although authorized in 2022 under Vehicle Code §38026.2, the majority of the pilot period was consumed by engineering analysis, public outreach, and CHP safety concurrence. With the 9.20-mile Master Plan adopted in 2025, the program is only now entering implementation. This bill does not expand authority—it provides sufficient time to measure rural economic impact and safety performance.”

Extension of the City of Needles pilot. The City of Needles is located in San Bernardino County and the Mojave Desert region of Southern California. It is mostly surrounded by federal lands, much of which is used for outdoor recreation, including OHV recreation, including those under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management and the Bureau of Reclamation.

Following precedent set by similar OHV pilots the Legislature approved for Inyo County and Red Rock Canyon State Park, the Legislature authorized the City of Needles to create its five-year pilot in 2022. For the next three years, the City undertook extensive planning and compliance activities, including engineering and traffic safety analysis, coordinated with federal and state entities, and held public workshops.

The City Council adopted its “OHV Master Plan”, codifying the pilot, on September 9, 2025, with the concurrence of the CHP, and a related signage plan on January 13, 2026. The Master Plan consists of 12 “combined-use” roadways, most of which are less than one mile, originating from locations within City limits and connecting to BLM lands. It is currently procuring signage; after installation and a public workshop, it anticipates announcing the official opening of the “combined-use” highways in 2026.

Assuming this timeframe and without the extension provided by this bill, the public will have less than two years to access “combined-use” highways. Accordingly, it is reasonable to extend the current sunset through 2033 not only to allow for public use but so the City can collect sufficient data to fulfill the statutory requirement of evaluating the pilot’s safety, environmental outcomes, enforcement impacts, and rural economic benefits.

Writing in support, the San Bernadino Sheriff’s Department states: “The City of Needles has demonstrated a strong commitment to implementing this program responsibly. Through extensive planning, engineering analysis, public outreach, and coordination with the California Highway Patrol, the city has ensured that designated routes meet appropriate safety standards. However, much of the initial pilot period was necessarily devoted to these foundational efforts, leaving limited time to evaluate the program’s long-term safety, environmental, and enforcement outcomes.”

Previous Legislation. SB 632, Chapter 592, Statutes of 2024 authorizes DPR to conduct a “combined-use” highway pilot at Red Rock Canyon State Park, located between the City of Bakersfield and the Mojave Desert. The pilot is on-going but set to sunset in 2030 with a report due to the Legislature in 2029.

AB 2152 (Smith) Chapter 185, Statutes of 2022 authorized the City of Needles, through January 1, 2028, to establish a pilot project to designate combined-use highways in the City to link existing OHV trails and to connect OHV recreational use areas with necessary services and lodging facilities.

AB 628, Chapter 532, Statutes of 2011 authorized Inyo County to establish the first OHV “combined-use” highway pilot program.

SB 402 (Borgeas), Chapter 211, Statutes of 2019 extended the sunset of the Inyo County OHV combined use pilot by five years to January 2025.

SB 1345 (Berryhill), Chapter 217, Statutes of 2016, extended the sunset of the Inyo County OHV combined use pilot by three years to January 1, 2020.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

City of Needles
San Bernadino County Sheriff’s Department

Opposition

None on file

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