
SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES AND WATER

Senator Josh Becker, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

Bill No: AB 1756 **Hearing Date:** July 1, 2026
Author: Jeff Gonzalez
Version: March 9, 2026 Amended
Urgency: No **Fiscal:** Yes
Consultant: Edith Hannigan

Subject: Off-highway vehicle recreation: City of Needles

SUMMARY

This bill would extend the sunset of an existing off-highway motor vehicle “combined use” highway pilot project in the City of Needles by five years.

BACKGROUND AND EXISTING LAW

State Vehicular Recreation Areas. State Vehicular Recreation Areas (SVRAs) are off-highway vehicle (OHV) parks operated by the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division (Division) of the California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks). Each SVRA has an operational program which provides, in most locations, the following services:

- Trails, tracks, and other OHV recreation opportunities.
- Restrooms, camping, shade ramadas, and water.
- OHV parts store.
- Public safety, including law enforcement, first aid, and search and rescue.
- Maintenance including repair and maintenance of OHV trails, buildings, equipment, and public use facilities.
- Interpretive and educational activities and publications promoting safe and responsible OHV recreation.
- Resource management designed to sustain OHV opportunities that protects and enhances wildlife habitat, and provides for erosion control and revegetation.

Inyo County Combined-Use Pilot. AB 628 (Conway, Chapter 532, Statutes of 2011) authorized Inyo County to designate road segments up to 10 miles in length for combined-use of regular traffic and OHVs on a pilot basis. Later legislation extended the sunset twice.

Inyo County submitted a report to the Legislature in December 2018 on the pilot program in consultation with California Highway Patrol (CHP), California Department of Transportation (CalTrans), and State Parks. The report notes that seven combined-use routes were approved for the pilot program with three opening in 2015 and the remaining four opening up in 2017. The system now involves combined use totaling approximately 45 miles.

Regarding safety, the report indicated no accidents occurred or citations were issued on the seven roads studied in the program. With respect to ridership, the seven roads did not experience an increase in OHV use in comparison to other maintained roads. The report also stated the pilot has not affected non-motorized recreation such as equestrian trails. Regarding road monitoring, the report notes several instances where OHVs were operating on the road shoulder. Ultimately, the report found that only a small number of OHVs were driving on the combined-use designated roads. The program sunset at the end of 2025.

City of Needles Pilot Program. 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 a five-year combined-use 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. It anticipates announcing the official opening of the “combined-use” highways this year.

Existing Law:

- 1) Establishes State Parks to administer and manage the state park system, including SVRAs, which provide OHV recreational opportunities. (Public Resources Code §§501, 5001, 5008, and 5090.43)
- 2) 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”. (Vehicle Code (VEH) §360)
- 3) 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)
- 4) Authorizes a local entity, State Parks, 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)
- 5) Prior to the designation of a “combined use” highway, requires a local entity, the Director of State Parks or a federal agency to first notify the Commissioner of the

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

- 6) Authorizes the above entities to promulgate necessary rules and regulations and install appropriate signage, as approved by the Caltrans. A “combined use” designation is only effective upon installation of such signage. (VEH §38026)
- 7) 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)
- 8) 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)
- 9) 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 State Parks, 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)
- 10) Authorizes State Parks 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)

PROPOSED LAW

This bill would:

- 1) Strike cross references to section 38026.1 of the Vehicle Code, as that code section is repealed.
- 2) Authorize any highways designated by the City of Needles under the pilot program created by the passage of AB 2152 (Smith, Chapter 185, Statutes of 2022) for combined regular and OHV vehicular use to remain valid for such uses for the duration of the pilot program, subject to action by the City of Needles.
- 3) Extend the OHV pilot program in the City of Needles until 2033.

ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT

According to the author, “AB 1756 is necessary to extend the City of Needles’ Off-Highway Motor Vehicle (OHV) 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.”

ARGUMENTS IN OPPOSITION

None received.

COMMENTS

Double referral. This bill was referred to this Committee and the Committee on Transportation. It was heard in Senate Transportation on June 24 and passed on the consent calendar with a vote of 13-0. Comments under the jurisdiction of the Transportation Committee are included here for completeness and context only.

Pilot ending before testing. 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.

Related Legislation

SB 632 (Caballero, Chapter 592, Statutes of 2024) authorizes State Parks 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.

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.

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

SUGGESTED AMENDMENTS: None

SUPPORT

City of Needles
San Bernardino County

OPPOSITION

None Received

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