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# SENATE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES AND WATER

Senator Josh Becker, Chair

2025 - 2026 Regular

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**Bill No:** AB 2453 **Hearing Date:** July 1, 2026  
**Author:** Michelle Rodriguez  
**Version:** May 28, 2026 Amended  
**Urgency:** No **Fiscal:** Yes  
**Consultant:** Edith Hannigan

**Subject:** Vehicles: off-highway motor vehicles

## SUMMARY

This bill would provide for the operation of off-highway motor vehicles by peace officers or first responders on highways intended for regular vehicular traffic, under certain conditions.

## BACKGROUND AND EXISTING LAW

**Off-highway vehicles (OHVs).** OHVs are vehicles designed to be operated off-highway and can generally be categorized into three groups: all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), recreational off-road vehicles (ROVs), or utility terrain vehicles (UTVs). ATVs have three or more tires, a straddle seat for the operator, and handlebars for steering control. ROVs and UTVs have four or more tires, non-straddle or “side-by-side” seating, and automotive-type controls for steering, throttle, and braking (i.e., a steering wheel and pedals). UTVs are generally equipped with larger cargo beds and can be retrofitted for law enforcement purposes by installing emergency lighting, sirens, logos, communications devices, and cab enclosures.

While OHVs are not required to be registered with the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) in the same fashion as standard on-road vehicles, OHVs are required to be registered with DMV and display a DMV-issued ID plate or sticker when operating on public land, with registration renewal every two years.

**Law enforcement use of OHVs.** Law enforcement first began using OHVs in the 1970s, given their ability to access remote areas inaccessible by foot or patrol cars. During the 1980s and 90s, a large OHV manufacturer began producing militarized ATVs for the U.S. Army and other military services. This same manufacturer started making OHVs for law enforcement, fire departments, and rescue operations in 2018 and others followed. Marketing materials for these vehicles generally describe their enhanced ability to provide access in rugged terrain or congested urban settings, flexibility given their compact size, and reduced operations and maintenance costs compared to a regular patrol vehicle. Law enforcement and first responders have used OHVs for search and rescue, crowd and event control, remote patrols (e.g., public lands, beaches), and medical or emergency incident response.

## Existing Law:

1) Defines an “off-highway motor vehicle” to be:

- a) A motorcycle, snowmobile, sand/dune buggy, all-terrain vehicle, jeep, “recreational” OHV, off-highway electric motorcycle;
  - b) Any vehicle that is operated off-highway; and,
  - c) An OHV operated by a non-resident of the state (Vehicle Code (VEH) §§38010, 38012).
- 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.” (VEH §360)
  - 3) Authorizes a peace officer to operate an OHV on highway only during an emergency response situation. (VEH §38025)
  - 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 (e.g., VEH §§38280-38321). Any operator of an OHV must be able to reach and operate all controls necessary to safely operate the OHV.

**PROPOSED LAW**

This bill would:

- 1) Authorize local authorities to adopt rules or regulations relating to the operation of OHV by peace officers or first responders subject to public review of the regulations, including by posting the regulations on the local authority’s website.
- 2) Require the policy or plan to include, but be not limited to:
  - a) A requirement that off-highway motor vehicles may only be operated on a highway for up to five miles for the purpose of accessing an off-highway recreational area or a location of patrol.
  - b) A description of the activities or locations for which the local authority seeks to authorize operation of off-highway motor vehicles pursuant to this subdivision and the approximate timeframe or duration of the authorization.
  - c) A description of any training, certification, or safety equipment that will be required by the local authority to ensure the safety of the public, including drivers and passengers.
- 3) Authorize first responders to operate an OHV upon a highway in an emergency response situation, subject to the following conditions:
  - a) The distance traveled on the highway by the off-highway motor vehicle does not exceed five miles.
  - b) The purpose of the travel is to access an off-highway recreational area or a location of patrol.
  - c) A local authority, as defined, of the jurisdiction in which the off-highway motor vehicle will be operated has adopted a policy or plan for the

operation of off-highway motor vehicles by peace officers or first responders while performing official duties, as specified.

- d) A peace officer or first responder operating an off-highway motor vehicle pursuant to these provisions shall comply with the terms and requirements of the policy or plan adopted by the applicable local authority.

### ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT

According to the author, “California’s first responders and peace officers are frequently required to operate off-highway vehicles (OHVs) in emergency, rescue, and public safety situations where regular vehicles cannot go. However, getting these OHVs to the locations where they are needed is often difficult because existing passenger safety requirements may be infeasible in these contexts, and current operational restrictions prohibit OHVs from traveling any distance on surface streets or thoroughfares, thereby limiting response effectiveness and efficiency. Current law was designed for recreational use and does not account for the urgent, unpredictable conditions under which these professionals must act to protect life and property. This bill provides a narrow and practical exemption to ensure that first responders and peace officers can perform their duties effectively without being constrained by provisions that were not intended for first responder operations or urgent situations. By clarifying that these requirements do not apply in the course of official duties, the bill promotes public safety while recognizing the unique demands placed on those who respond in critical situations.”

### 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 9 and passed with a vote of 13-0. Comments under the jurisdiction of the Transportation Committee are included here for completeness and context only.

**Addressing practical uses of OHV.** Current law authorizes peace officers to operate an OHV on highway, without limitation, when responding to an emergency. The Cities of Carlsbad and Ontario assert that the above authority should be expanded to include first responders and for purposes other than emergencies where traditional patrol vehicle access is constrained or where trailering an OHV becomes impractical. These include beach patrols, incident response at parks or open space areas, concerts, sporting events, street fairs, or similar events closed to vehicle traffic.

Writing in support, and as sponsors of the bill, the City of Carlsbad states:

Under current law, only peace officers are permitted to operate off-highway vehicles on highways during an emergency response situation. While this authority is critical, it does not extend to the many other first responders — including firefighters, paramedics, lifeguards and emergency medical technicians — who are often called upon to respond to emergencies in areas where off-highway vehicles are the most practical and effective means of reaching those in need.

The City of Carlsbad encompasses terrain where traditional emergency vehicles are unable to quickly access an incident. Off-highway vehicles allow first responders to navigate beaches, narrow trails, unpaved roads, and other challenging terrain far more rapidly than conventional apparatus. In time-sensitive emergencies such as wildfires, search-and-rescue operations, and medical calls in remote areas or difficult terrain, the ability to lawfully drive these vehicles on a highway — even briefly — to reach an incident can mean the difference between life and death.

AB 2453 closes a meaningful gap in existing law by ensuring that all qualified first responders have the same operational flexibility currently afforded to peace officers.

**Related Legislation**

SB 637 (Knight), Chapter 594, Statutes of 2003, authorized peace officers to operate OHVs on highway in an emergency response situation.

**SUGGESTED AMENDMENTS: none**

**SUPPORT**

City of Carlsbad (sponsor)  
City of Ontario

**OPPOSITION**

None Received

**-- END --**