

Mr. Earl E. Devaney  
Inspector General  
Department of Interior  
1849 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20240

July 18, 2007

Dear Mr. Devaney:

I am writing on behalf of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) to request that your office conduct a review of the ability of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to meet its law enforcement obligations with respect to the rising tide of irresponsible off-road vehicle usage on its lands. In addition, we request your office specifically to review the events during the Easter 2007 weekend at Little Sahara Recreational Area in Utah. As part of your review of the agency's incident management, we direct your scrutiny towards orders that a ranger remain at a fixed position and not respond to an accident or law enforcement emergency.

As you know, off-road vehicles pose an increasing challenge for federal land managers, in general, and BLM, in particular. As reckless off-road vehicle use rises, PEER is seeing troubling evidence that land management agencies are losing their ability to safeguard visitors or prevent injuries, let alone protect the landscapes from being scarred, burned and trashed.

A 2007 BLM analysis of the preparedness of its Little Sahara Recreational Area (attached) foresees "a continued rise in the number and severity of incidents involving crimes against persons" fueled by firearms, drugs and alcohol at mass off-road gatherings during holiday weekends. This analysis further finds that the "high number of personal injury accidents, lost persons, littering, burning of flammable materials on the mountain and various safety violations" caused by irresponsible off-roading were fanning visitor fears and producing "a nearly all-reactive law enforcement operation with little opportunity to deter or reduce unlawful behavior."

This official forecast proved prescient for the actual events as they unfolded during the 2007 Easter weekend when a gathering of an estimated one thousand off-road vehicle enthusiasts at Little Sahara degenerated into "near riot conditions" (incident reports also attached). Over that weekend, 37 injuries, including a state Highway Patrol officer, and some 300 arrests and citations were tallied. More than 50 officers from state, federal and local agencies called to the scene tried unsuccessfully to cope with numerous sexual assaults and other attacks attributed to marauding bands of off-roaders.

Despite the desperate need for a law enforcement presence at Little Sahara, a BLM Field manager, assigned as incident commander, issued an order (also attached) directing one ranger to stay at the visitor center to oversee fee collection:

“Should there be an accident or law enforcement emergency, you will not respond. By leaving the VC [visitor center], there would be no law enforcement present, which I believe would leave BLM employees sitting targets for other potential occurrences.”

On behalf of PEER, I am asking you to review the BLM’s handling of events at Little Sahara to this past Easter as well as the agency’s overall preparedness to cope with growing off-road induced problems.

Should your office require additional information about this request, or additional materials relating to this request, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Cordially,

Jeff Ruch  
Executive Director