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Jeep ride in canyon may lead to court

Brent Israelsen The Salt Lake Tribune

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management has completed an investigation into an unauthorized Jeep ride during the weekend of April 30 in Arch Canyon in southeastern Utah. A top BLM law-enforcement official in Washington said BLM rangers are now discussing the matter with the U.S. Attorney's Office in Utah.

"We're serious about this," said Keith Aller, the BLM's deputy director of law enforcement. "We don't like people doing these things without a permit." Environmentalists are urging that "meaningful fines and citations" be lodged against the event organizers, which include elected **San Juan** County officials and representatives of Jeep Jamboree USA.

Failure to prosecute the case "would send a powerful message" that the BLM does not take violations of its regulations seriously, wrote Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance attorney Heidi McIntosh in a letter delivered Thursday to the BLM.

San Juan County Commissioner Lynn Stevens, who helped lead the Jeep enthusiasts up Arch Canyon during the event, told The Salt Lake Tribune this week that no permit was necessary because the route in the canyon is owned by the county.

Stevens maintains that the Arch Canyon route qualifies as a "highway" under an 1866 law known as RS 2477, which granted broad rights-of-way across federal land.

However, the BLM does not recognize Arch Canyon as a valid RS 2477 road and has required Jeep Jamboree USA to get a permit for its organized event, which annually attracts dozens of participants.

This year, the BLM denied the permit request from Jeep Jamboree, saying more environmental studies were needed because of the presence of an endangered species.

San Juan County, which is seeking to cash in on the popularity of off-highway vehicles, then offered to play host to the event under the theory that the BLM cannot control access in the canyon. County Sheriff Mike Lacy led about 30 Jeeps up the canyon and back.

According to SUWA, which posted several activists in Arch Canyon, each Jeep crossed the stream 118 times.

The crossings caused streambank erosion, increased sediment in the water and crushed streamside vegetation, McIntosh said.

Utah BLM spokesman Don Banks said he expects the U.S. Attorney's Office will decide whether to take action on the Arch Canyon incident within the next two weeks.

Caption: Graphic: Arch Canyon conflict (map) The Salt Lake Tribune

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