

Officials investigating shredded documents found at state park

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

The California Department of Parks and Recreation is investigating whether crucial records were destroyed by officials at Ocotillo Wells State Vehicular Recreation Area, an off-roading park in the desert east of San Diego.

Richard Stapler, a spokesman for the California Natural Resources Agency, which oversees the state parks department, confirmed that an investigation is under way at Ocotillo Wells. He also said a new superintendent, Kent Gresham, was put in charge of Ocotillo Wells on Thursday.

"This has all happened just in the past 24 hours," Stapler said Friday.

State officials declined to give further details Friday, citing the ongoing investigation.

But an administration official who was briefed on the Ocotillo investigation told the *Bee* that it concerned the unauthorized destruction of documents. The source spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter.

The official said that Kathy Dolinar, park superintendent at Ocotillo Wells, was placed on "administrative time off" as of Thursday. In addition, another employee, the park's administrative officer, had been previously reassigned.

The *Bee* was unable to reach Dolinar for comment.

The investigation was reportedly sparked when, about two weeks ago, custodial staff at Ocotillo Wells found bags of shredded

documents in a trash bin and alerted headquarters officials. Destruction of documents would violate a department-wide directive in July ordering parks employees to preserve all records for a larger investigation into financial misconduct.

The episode marks the latest fallout from a scandal in which the state parks department was found in July to have hidden \$54 million in two park operating funds. For reasons that remain under investigation, the parks department kept the money secret for years by reporting false balances to the state Department of Finance.

Parks director Ruth Coleman resigned as the scandal unfolded. Numerous other parks officials were either fired or demoted. Separate investigations are under way by the state auditor and attorney general's office.

Ocotillo Wells is the largest of eight off-roading parks operated by the state Department of Parks and Recreation. Over the past year, the park has also been the source of sexual harassment complaints filed by employees against park supervisors, and a whistle-blower complaint alleging supervisors refused to uphold environmental laws to protect wildlife and habitat.