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The plant that led to the closing of 48,000 acres of local sand dunes is doing quite well, according to the latest count by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

The Peirson's milk-vetch is listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

County Board of Supervisors Chairman Wally Leimgruber said he's seen the report.

"It shows the plant is doing very well," he said Thursday, adding discussions are under way with BLM to get those closed areas reopened.

"Imperial County's goal is to get these areas opened, especially in the Imperial County Sand Dunes Recreation Area."

Brian Hawthorne, public lands director for the Pocatello, Idaho-based Blue Ribbon Coalition, said the study indicates off-highway vehicle impacts to the milk-vetch are small when compared to other sources. He said the study indicates factors other than human uses are influencing the overall health of the species, which did well in 2005.

"The bottom line is that endangered species issues often require creative solutions," Hawthorne said by e-mail. "OHV groups believe that humans and species can coexist, and this report indicates this is true. We will diligently participate in these ongoing processes to ensure the land managers strike an appropriate balance."

Daniel Patterson, desert ecologist with the Phoenix-based Center for Biological Diversity, had a different take on the report.

"Endangered Species Act protection and the last five years of balanced land management are supporting recovery of the Algodones Dunes' unique web-of-life," Patterson said by e-mail. "But the (President George) Bush BLM's unethical plan to open conservation lands to off-road abuse, as a political favor to industry lobbyists, would end recovery of dune life and hurt balanced multiple uses of the dunes."

BLM spokeswoman Jan Bedrosian said the monitoring data "does not have a direct effect on any of the existing closures at the Imperial Sand Dunes. It will be used as part of the biological opinion process to help us implement the plan and make adjustments as time goes along."

The report, titled "2005 Monitoring of Peirson's Milk-vetch in the Algodones Dunes, Imperial County, California," states: "The 2004-2005 growing season was very favorable for the germination and establishment of Astragalus magdalenae var. peirsonii and was probably the best growing season for the species since the 1997-1998 growing season. Rains beginning in October 2004 resulted in a significant germination event. As a result, there were an estimated 1,831,076 Peirson's milk-vetch plants throughout the seven management areas of the dunes in 2005. This translates into an estimated density of 86.3 plants/hectare, but the species was not uniformly distributed throughout the seven management areas. The highest estimated ASMAP density was in the Ogilby Management Area (132.0 plants/ha) and the lowest estimated density was in the Glamis management area (21.5 plants/ha), which had a significantly lower density that any of the other management areas. The adaptive management area (118.0 plants/ha) had the second-highest density and was not significantly different from the Ogilby Management Area.

The Buttercup Management Area (88.5 plants/ha) had the next highest estimated density, but because of the variability between sampling units in that area, its estimated density was not significantly different from any of

the other management areas except Glamis. The Gecko (80.8 plants/ha) and Wilderness (71.9 plants/ha) management areas were not significantly different from each other, though the estimated density of the former was greater than the latter. The Mammoth Wash Management Area (55.0 plants/ha) had the second lowest density."

The report, dated Sept. 8, compares this year's numbers to those of previous years' counts.

"There were major differences between 2005 and the years 2003 and 2004, both in numbers of plants and percent of plants flowering," the report states.

"The favorable 2004-2005 growing season resulted in much higher numbers of plants in spring 2005 than in either 2003 or 2004, and the onset of rains in October 2004 resulted in a high percentage of plants flowering at the time of 2005 monitoring. In contrast, only 0.5 percent and 2.3 percent of the total number of plants were flowering at the time of 2003 and 2004 monitoring, respectively. The percentage of plants flowering in 2005 was more similar to percentages observed between 1998-2002."

The report also addresses damage to the plant.

"About 0.44 percent of the estimated total number of Peirson's milk-vetch plants showed evidence of OHV damage at the time of the survey," the report states. "Estimates of OHV damage for each of the management areas ranged from 0.0 percent to 2.37 percent. Another 4.43 percent of the total number of plants showed evidence of damage from sources other than OHVs. Estimates of non-OHV damage for each of the management areas ranged from 0.29 percent to 6.69 percent. Although this category was originally intended to keep track of damage from insects and disease, observers in 2005 included damage from desiccation, which was by far the most common entry in this category.

Consequently, the management areas with the highest percentage of non-OHV damage were those that were monitored late in the sampling period, by which time temperatures were high and soil moisture diminished."

In summary, the report says: "Rains beginning in October 2004 resulted in a significant germination event and an estimated 1,831,076 plants occupied the Dunes in spring 2005. Of this total, 1,369,482 plants (75 percent) were flowering or past-flowering at the time of monitoring. Only 21,777 (1.6

percent) of these plants were more than a year old. Thus, 98.4 percent of the 2005 plants represented a 2004-2005 growing season cohort. This supports previous contentions that this species functions more like an annual than a perennial and that the majority of seeds in the seed bank are produced from current year plants in good rainfall years.

"Because of the very favorable 2004-2005 growing season, we now have the clearest picture yet of the distribution of the Peirson's milk-vetch in the Algodones Dunes."

Monitoring of the plant is a requirement of the recreation area management plan approved by BLM in May as specified in the biological opinion issued by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in compliance with the ESA, according to a BLM press release. The data were collected from more than 500 transects spread throughout the 160,000 acre Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area within the area's seven management areas with habitat suitable for Peirson's milk-vetch. Contractors in three teams consisting of 36 technicians walked

1,923 miles between late winter 2004 and early spring of 2005, collecting data under the supervision of BLM botanists.

The area closures resulted from an agreement between the BLM, several environmental groups that filed a lawsuit against BLM alleging it failed to consult with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service regarding potential

impacts to endangered species from off-road vehicle use in the sand dunes and several off-highway vehicle groups that had minimal input in the case. A decision by BLM to not litigate the issue led to the settlement.

The plant is considered a threatened species and certain areas were closed to off-highway vehicles to minimize impacts to the plant. In 2004 the plant count found 4,529 milk-vetch in the Buttercup area, 43,275 in the Gecko area and 28,627 in Glamis. By contrast, the North Algodones Wilderness Area, long closed to vehicles, had 2,024 plants. The data show a total number of milk-vetch in the entire dunes as 286,374, with 731 damaged by OHVs. That equals .25 percent.

A count in 2003 shows there were 59,591 plants in the wilderness area and 115,267 in the Gecko area.

Initially, the critical habitat ruling was expected to include almost 50,000 acres, but was reduced because of the potential economic losses to the area, according to the Fish & Wildlife Service's "Final Economic Analysis of Critical Habitat Designation for the Peirson's Milk Vetch." The critical habitat area includes 21,836 acres.

The size of the critical habitat is being challenged by the Center for Biological Diversity, for allegedly being too small. A challenge of the critical habitat by the Sacramento-based Pacific Legal Foundation, for allegedly being too big was withdrawn pending the outcome of the CBD case, according to a PLF attorney.

This year's report can be seen at

www.blm.gov/nhp/spotlight/state_info/highlights.htm