

# Economics trumps plant in decision to reduce critical habitat

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Federal wildlife officials on Thursday reduced habitat protections for a threatened plant that grows on the desert's most popular off-roading dunes, saying the economic impact from barring recreationists from the area outweighs the need to protect the plant.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reduced the critical habitat in the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area for Peirson's milk-vetch, a member of the pea family with pale purple flowers, to 12,105 acres. That is down 45 percent from a 2004 designation.

Environmentalists worry the decision could drive the plant closer to extinction, and it sparked concern that some areas that have been closed to off-roaders since 2000 would be reopened under a new plan being developed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management based on the habitat decision.

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"The ongoing systematic reductions and now fragmentation of habitat is no Valentine's Day gift for the struggling plant," said Ileene Anderson, an ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Off-roaders said they were pleased by the decision affecting the wind-sculpted dunes north of the Mexican border.

"It's a positive, absolutely," said Grant George, an advisory board member of the American Sand Association who owns a dune buggy shop in Rialto. He said it remains to be seen, though, how certain areas will be affected by the new decision.

Steve Borchard, BLM's desert district manager, said the agency would seek public input while developing the dunes' new management plan.

Critical habitat protections were removed from areas within the dunes known as the Gecko and Glamis management areas because of an economic analysis that found that keeping the designation would have led to a reduction of up to \$113 million spent in the area over the next 20 years, said Jane Hendron, a spokeswoman for the wildlife service.

Hendron said the Endangered Species Act allows for economic considerations when designating so-called critical habitat, land considered essential for a species to survive.

Other areas were downsized because the habitat boundaries were refined to where the plants grow, she said.

"We tried to hone in on areas with the densest amount of plants," she said.