

Habitat reduced for milk vetch

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A victory for off-road enthusiasts is a loss for environmentalists protecting the Pierson's milk vetch.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Thursday approved reducing the critical habitat for the milk vetch by more than 9,700 acres in the Algodones Dunes in Imperial County.

The original critical habitat was designated in 2004 at 21,863 acres, but was reduced Thursday to 12,105 acres.

"That's positive in that it opens up more land," said El Centro Chamber of Commerce chief executive officer and United Desert Gateway representative Cathy Kennerson. "It'll open up more area and, I'm not sure that in itself will bring in more people, but it will give those out there more of a playground."

In November 2000, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Sierra Club and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility sued the U.S. Bureau of Land Management to force it to close 49,000 acres of the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreational Area to protect the milk vetch.

In November 2001, the American Sand Association, San Diego Off-Road Coalition and the Off-Road Business Association then sued the Fish and Wildlife Service to remove the plant from the endangered species list.

In July 2002 a federal judge in San Diego ordered the Fish and Wildlife Service to designate critical habitat for the milk vetch and seven other endangered or threatened plants.

That year 52,780 acres were designated as critical habitat for the milk vetch. The next year that number was reduced to 21,836.

It's now been cut 33 percent, according to Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

Daniel Patterson, an ecologist and Southwest director for PEER, said he, nor PEER, agreed with the decision

"It's a pretty poor decision," he said. "It's not wise for the feds to continue to try to not bring some balanced conversation to the dunes.

"This is what I would call a political decision, not a science decision," he said. "This clearly doesn't follow the best science."

Patterson said his group hasn't yet decided to pursue an appeal or further legal action.

Bob Mason, president of the American Sand Association, said a decision is still pending on the de-listing of the milk vetch from the endangered species list.

He said if it is not de-listed, the ASA will pursue getting it taken off the list again.

"We're happy with what we see," Mason said. "The bottom line is that what we see looks good, but as of right now, there will be no immediate changes."

Mason said the BLM would have to go through its recreation area management plan before designating the critical habitat

area.