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Wildflower to retain federal protection; 50,000 acres remain closed to off-road enthusiasts

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A plant that is threatened with extinction and whose low numbers prompted officials to close more than one-third of the desert's most popular off-roading area will remain under federal protection, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said Wednesday.

Off-highway vehicle groups, including the American Sand Association, had petitioned the federal wildlife agency seeking to remove the Pierson's milk-vetch for the federal list of endangered and threatened plants and animals.

The groups said the plant's numbers were more abundant than previously reported and they believed its seed bank could support a healthy and stable population.

But the wildlife agency said those claims could not be supported, in part because rainfall amounts differed between survey years, which could significantly change the number of plants.

The agency used data from federal agencies and independent scientists, and the decision to keep the plant protected was peer-reviewed, said Jane Hendron, a fish and wildlife spokeswoman.

"The assertion that the plants are in even greater number was not borne out by the data," she said. "The plant is affected by off-highway vehicle use, and it's reproductive capacity can also be affected by the off-highway vehicle use."

A member of the pea family, the milk-vetch has pale purple flowers and the entire U.S. population lives at the towering dunes that stretch north of the Mexican border in Imperial County.

The wildlife service said that more than 65 percent of the plant's population sits within the roughly 50,000 acres that were closed in 2000 by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management as part of settlement negotiations with environmental groups.

Charlene Bower, a longtime dunes enthusiast who lives in Riverside and works for Yucaipa-based Sand Addiction Magazine, a bimonthly publication geared toward off-roaders, said the decision to keep the plant under protection was unfortunate.

"That means it's less likely the land will be reopened ... and hopefully it will not lead to more closures," Bower said.

Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity,



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Off-roading groups have said the Pierson's milk-vetch plant's numbers were more abundant than previously reported, and they believed its seed bank could support a healthy and stable population. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said those claims could not be supported.

which sought the plant's protection, said she hoped those temporary closures would become permanent when the BLM completes an updated management plan for the dunes.

Stephen Razo, a BLM spokesman, said a draft is expected to be released by early next year and the range of options being considered would address the closures.