

## Dunes Plan Released to the Public

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More than 10 years in the making, the Bureau of Land Management has at last released its proposed Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area management plan. If it receives no legal challenges, the plan could go into effect by April.

No chance.

This management plan was borne of legal discontent, a settlement in 2000 to lawsuits by environmental groups looking for the protection of native plant species to the dunes. The result was the closure of nearly 50,000 acres of desert lands to off-highway vehicle traffic.

Now, with the proposed management plan in the public scoping phase, all but 8,800 acres of land are being proposed for re-opening, with that closed-off area serving as the protected acreage for the purple-flowered Pierson's milk-vetch, a native species at the center of the lawsuits and closure over a decade ago.

Like those who defend the rights of the off-road community to safely and responsibly enjoy nature's bounty, we are very pleased to see this plan, especially with the idea that additional federal lands could be open to duners by next year.

We are also realists, and fully expect the same environmental groups who shut down the desert — **the Center for Biological Diversity**, the Sierra Club and Public Employees for the Environmental Responsibility — to attempt to shut it down again. These are savvy operators, so we can fully expect the lawsuit and request for stay to be done in a federal court with a more environmental lean.

It's unfortunate that it always has to be an either/or proposition when it comes to the desert and environmental issues.

Imperial County benefits from off-road traffic, and open desert is an economic boon to our areas. Off-highway advocacy groups like the locally based United Desert Gateway are pleased with the amount of land being opened up.

On the other hand, environmental officials contacted for a story last week expressed disappointment with BLM, and are already implying a suit is forthcoming.

We've long advocated a middle ground that makes sense, one that closes off some areas to protect native species, but not too much. We are pleased that this plan opens up so much, yet we see it as an easy target for litigation.

Was the closure so small to be used as a negotiation starting point? We can't say. But one thing is for certain, 8,800 from 49,000 is sure to set off the environmental groups.

Reporting the plan is the start; reporting the lawsuits will be next. Let's just hope it doesn't take another decade to sort this management plan out.