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Imperial Sand Dunes management plan to open previously closed habitat

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About 40,000 acres of previously closed rare species habitat is scheduled to become open to off-highway vehicle use under the Bureau of Land Management's newly released Imperial Sand Dunes management plan.

The plan is not expected to be implemented for 90 days, during which time the closed areas will remain off limits to recreational use.

Off-road enthusiasts and local business advocates hailed the plan, while environmental advocates ensured legal action to keep the closures in place would be forthcoming.

"It's the right thing to do," said Lloyd Misner, of the Orange County ATV Association.

As someone who had never gotten the opportunity to ride in the closed area, he said he is looking forward to doing so. Yet, his enthusiasm was tempered.



Different all-terrain vehicles ride throughout Glamis on Thanksgiving weekend in eastern Imperial County.
(STEVEN ESPERANZA FILE PHOTO / June 19, 2013)

"I will be surprised if I get to do it this year," he said. "I suspect it's going to be challenged in court."

A court settlement in 2000 had succeeded in forcing the BLM to initially close 49,000 acres of the dunes in order to protect the critical habitat of the Pierson's milk-vetch, an endangered species native to the area. Under the new Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area management plan most of

that previously closed area would be opened.

The final plan is based on new species and habitat inventories, scientific data and a new determination by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding Pierson's milk-vetch critical habitat, a press release stated.

Since the Bureau's draft management plan was released in September proposing the re-opening of the closed area,

environmental advocates expressed concern.

“It is unbalanced in regards to living up to conservation mandates,” said Ileene Anderson, biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

The final plan would, Anderson said, limit the Pierson’s milk-vetch’s existence to one similar to that of a patient stuck indefinitely in an intensive care unit.

“It doesn’t provide protection outside of the critical habitat for the plants to re-establish and recover,” she said.

Along with solar and wind energy development that reduces wildlife and plant habitat, the CBD cites concerns about the potential impact more open riding areas would have on the local air quality.

“We definitely think the bureau can do better than that,” Anderson said. “We’re going to challenge this plan.”

The possible re-opening of the closed areas would nearly double the amount of land available for recreational use in the 164,000-acre area.

With the potential opening of more OHV recreational space, comes the potential to attract more visitors, which in recent years has gradually declined from a high of about 1,464,000 in 2006 to about 1,133,000 in fiscal year 2011.

More visitors could translate as more money for local communities.

It is estimated that dunes visitors spent between \$577 million and \$1.28 billion during October 2005 to May 2006 in the gateway communities of Blythe, Brawley, El Centro and Yuma, according to the ISDRA business plan.

The dunes’ positive economic impact is a major reason the United Desert Gateway backed the management plan’s proposal to open the previously closed dunes.

“It gives credence to protecting the Pierson’s milk-vetch and other desert resources in the area,” said UDG Executive Director Charla Teeters-Stewart, “at the same time balancing the need for recreation and visitors to our area.”

However, the survey the BLM cites in its business plan coincides with the drop in visitorship, and Teeters-Stewart said a new visitor survey is needed to provide a better economic assessment.

“We want to make sure that the data is accurate,” Teeters-Stewart said.

By the numbers

\$1,182.37 — spent on average per visitor in preparation for dunes trip

\$230.8 to \$513.2 million — spent in Brawley

\$150.0 to \$333.6 million — spent in El Centro

\$52.0 to \$115.5 million — spent in Blythe/Palo Verde

\$132.7 to \$295.1 million — spent in Yuma

Source: ISDRA 2012 business plan