



June 21, 2013 10:28 PM
BY CHRIS McDANIEL



Although the fees are expected to go up later this year for dunes at the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area (ISDRA), sand sport aficionados will have a vast amount of newly opened acreage in certain portions of the dunes to explore with their off-highway vehicles (OHVs).

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recently approved an updated ISDRA Management Plan which includes amendments to the California Desert Conservation Area Plan to open up about 40,000 acres of land to OHV usage. That will bring the total amount of acres accessible by OHVs to about 165,000 acres. Only about 125,000 acres had previously been accessible to motorized vehicles.

Dunes plan opens old areas, closes others

However, other portions of the dunes which had previously been open to OHV usage will be closed to motorized vehicles.

- The dunes in the Buttercup area will see a reduction in OHV-open area and a shift in the closure from the current location next to the campground to an area near the international border.
- The dunes in the Glamis and Gecko Areas will see an increase in OHV-recreation area, but will lose some camping in an area called “The Washes.”
- The dunes in the Gordons Well area will see a reduction in OHV-riding area and access to the dunes to protect native plant species.
- The dunes in the Mammoth wash area will see more of that riding area closed.

The 40,000 acres slated to be reopened to OHVs will remain closed until early fall, opening just in time to be accessible to dunes when duning season begins.

“More than a million people flock to this unique desert landscape each year to enjoy responsible, family-based off-highway vehicle recreation, stunning scenery and wilderness solitude,” said Jim Kenna, BLM California State Director.

“This final plan benefited from thorough scientific review and important public feedback, and it will ensure the great family tradition of OHV recreation will continue at Imperial Sand Dunes as we protect key desert habitat.”

In October 2000, BLM closed about 49,300 acres within ISDRA to OHVs as part of a conservation effort to protect the Peirson's milk vetch, a plant species only found in the dunes which is listed as endangered under the California Endangered Species Act and threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act.

In addition to previous closures, the closure in 2000 made more than 75,000 acres of the dunes in five selected areas unavailable to motorized recreation in compliance with a U.S. District Court settlement agreement with conservation organizations.

Only about 35,000 acres will now be off-limits to motorized vehicles, including about 11,670 acres considered critical habitat area for the threatened Peirson's milk vetch.

The final plan was based on new species and habitat inventories, other scientific data, and a new determination by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding Peirson's milk vetch critical habitat.

Several conservation groups are extremely displeased so many acres will be reopened to OHV use.

“This plan pushes the rare plants and animals of the Algodones Dunes closer to extinction, robbing them of a huge part of their safe haven,” said Ileene Anderson with the Center for Biological Diversity.

“I’m shocked that the BLM decided to adopt such a destructive, damaging plan — right when it should be carefully protecting these wild creatures and places to make up for vast energy projects that are being developed nearby.”

According to the Center for Biological Diversity, in addition to Peirson's milk vetch, the dunes are home to several imperiled species including the desert tortoise, the Algodones Dunes sunflower, the flat-tailed horned lizard and several dozen invertebrate species that live nowhere else on the planet.

“The Interior Department's decision is just baffling,” said Karen Schambach, California Field Director for Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER).

“The current situation allows ample opportunity for vehicles on the dunes. This change displays a frightful ignorance of biology and a complete disregard for wildlife habitat from an agency the public trusts to protect these sensitive areas.”

Greg Suba, conservation director for the California Native Plant Society, said the “rare and endemic plants are irreplaceable parts of nature. BLM's plan would sacrifice these national treasures to destruction from off-road-ers who can't even follow the rules already in place today.”

BLM has considered the ramifications of opening up the previously closed acreage and has made great efforts to ensure both the environment and duners can coexist, said David C. Briery of BLM California Desert District external affairs.

“The record of decision for the ISDRA Management Plan provides a balance between science-based conservation and sustainable recreation.”

Anderson remains unconvinced.