

STAFF REPORT

AGENDA ITEM: Bureau of Land Management (BLM) El Centro Field Office: Draft Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area Management Plan (RAMP)/Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)

STAFF: Barbara Greenwood, OHMVR Division

DATE: April 29, 2010

Discussion: The BLM will present an overview of the Draft Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area RAMP/EIS.

Background: As part of the California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) Plan, in 1987, the BLM El Centro Field Office completed a RAMP to establish goals, objectives, and management actions for the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area (ISDRA). The RAMP was subsequently updated in 2003 and an approved Record of Decision (ROD) was finalized in 2005.

In 1998, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) designated the Perison's milk-vetch as a threatened species and concluded that Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) use was causing an adverse impact on the plant. As a result of the FWS designation and conclusion, in 2000, the Center for Biological Diversity, and others, filed for injunctive relief in U.S. District Court against BLM alleging that BLM was in violation of section 7 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) by failing to formally consult with the FWS in the effects of adoption of the CDCA Plan, as amended, upon threatened and endangered species, specifically the Perison's milk-vetch. In 2006, the court vacated and remanded BLM's 2005 ROD approving the 2003 ISDRA RAMP/Final EIS. The order and injunction: (1) remanded the 2003 RAMP for further consideration by BLM; (2) vacated and remanded to the FWS portions of the Biological Opinion (BO) for the 2003 RAMP; and (3) required that BLM maintain the temporary vehicle closure of five areas to protect the Peirson's milk-vetch until such time as a new RAMP, final EIS, ROD, and BO are completed and filed with the court.

BLM began work on a new RAMP, to address the new critical habitat designation. Several key issues were identified during the scoping process that will be addressed in the new RAMP and will help drive the development of alternatives. These issues included: Identification of areas open and closed to motorized OHV recreation, Identification of other allowable uses within the planning area, Resource protection (microphyll woodland communities, plants, wildlife, cultural resources). A handful of other issues were also identified during the scoping process that will be considered during the planning process, including: Facilities management, Law enforcement/Public health and safety, Fee program management, Possibility of concessions, Visitor capacity and Solid waste/hazardous materials management.

Overview:

The planning area of the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area (ISDRA) encompasses 214,930 acres of lands, of which approximately 150,000 acres are located in eastern Imperial County bound to the west by the Old Coachella Canal, to the east by the Union Pacific Railroad, to the north by Mammoth Wash, and to the south by Interstate 8 and the California/Mexico border. The primary activities in the ISDRA include off-highway vehicle use and camping.

The planning process for the Draft RAMP/EIS, was funded by a 2008/09 grant in the amount of \$180,000. The RAMP is required to replace the existing management plan which has become outdated as a result of the federal listing and designation of critical habitat for Peirson's milk-vetch as a threatened species, designation of the North Algodones Wilderness (designated by the U.S. Congress in 1994), and change in visitor use (a heavy increase in OHV use compared to 1987). This management plan considers eight alternatives addressing environmental impacts of many land management issues, including recreation, renewable energy, cultural resources, public health and safety, and species listed under the Endangered Species Act. A range of alternatives are analyzed in the RAMP/EIS, including closure of areas designated as critical habitat by the U.S. FWS to off-highway vehicle use.

See attachments for an overview of the eight alternatives relating to OHVs, Vehicle Camping, Peirson's milk-vetch, and microphyll woodland and maps of each alternative.

Status:

The BLM recently held three public meetings in San Diego, El Centro and Phoenix, April 13th, 14th, and 15th to take input on the RAMP/EIS.

The 90-day public comment on the ISDRA Draft RAMP/EIS began March 26, 2010 and will end June 23, 2010. The public is encouraged to submit written comments via mail or email relative to the analysis presented in the Draft RAMP/EIS.

Commission Action:

No recommendation made. To be determined by the Commission.