



DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION

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OHMVR COMMISSION MEETING
Sacramento, CA

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STAFF REPORT: 2022 Heber Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area Wildlife Habitat Protection Plan

STAFF: Sara Lockett, Senior Environmental Scientist

SUBJECT: Presentation of Heber Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area's 2022 Wildlife Habitat Protection Plan Update

Summary

Over the past year, Heber Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area's (SVRA) management and resources staff have been working with the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division (OHMVRD) and the Natural Resources Division (NRD) to update Heber Dunes SVRA's Wildlife Habitat Protection Plan (WHPP) to meet the new legislative changes and requirements made to the California Public Resources Code (PRC) by the Senate Bill (SB) 249 mandate. The 2022 Heber Dunes SVRA WHPP update fulfills the SB 249 mandate to prepare and implement an updated WHPP [PRC §5090.32 (g)], which considers state and regional conservation objectives [PRC §5090.32 (g)], applies best available science [PRC §5090.39(a)(1), provides opportunity for public comment [PRC§5090.39(a)(2)] and implements annual monitoring [PRC §5090.35. (d)]. Starting March 6, 2022, the Heber Dunes WHPP draft will start the formal 30-day public comment period to solicit public review and comments on the draft.

Discussion

Background:

In 2017, SB 249 called for OHMVRD to prepare and implement updated WHPPs [PRC§5090.32 (g)], which consider state and regional conservation objectives [PRC§5090.32(g)], contain an updated Wildlife Inventory and inventory of native plant communities, [PRC §5090.35(c)(1)], and implement annual monitoring [PRC §5090.35. (d)]. Additionally, SB 249 called for the Department to apply best available science and allow for public comment on the WHPPs [PRC §5090.39(a)]. This WHPP update will supersede the 2001 Heber Dunes SVRA WHPP.

In 2020, a working group consisting of staff from the SVRAS, OHMVRD and NRD developed a framework, [2021 Wildlife Habitat Protection Plan Framework \(WHPP Framework\)](#), to provide a roadmap for the revision and update of the WHPPs for each

SVRA using the principles of adaptive management. Heber Dunes SVRA staff and managers met monthly with staff from OHMVRD and NRD to workshop ideas, develop objectives, and ensure best available science was applied to the update process. The Draft 2022 Heber Dunes SVRA WHPP has been through multiple rounds of review by staff at Heber Dunes SVRA, Ocotillo Wells District, OHMVRD, NRD, and Parks Legal.

Update:

The Draft 2022 Heber Dunes SVRA WHPP was developed based on planning principles presented within the WHPP Framework including adaptive management, application of best available science, as well as public comment and peer review opportunities. The document is organized by the adaptive management process: natural resources assessments, developing goals and objectives, identifying management actions, implementing a monitoring program, and evaluating and adapting monitoring programs as needed.

- **Natural Resources Assessment:** this information provides the basis or baseline for applying adaptive management. The resource assessments include an overview of PRC-required wildlife and native plant inventories, invasive species distribution, and details regarding sensitive resources and wildlife movement, including landscape connectivity.
- **Goals and Objectives:** The goals of the WHPP are to conserve and improve vegetation, wildlife, habitat, and soils. Conservation and improvement objectives follow S.M.A.R.T. format principles and inherently conform to the best available science and adaptive management. S.M.A.R.T. refers to objectives that are “specific,” “measurable,” “achievable/attainable,” “realistic,” and “timely.” The objectives are based on the natural resource assessments and span the next five years.
- **Management Actions:** Management actions are responses that can be taken to improve habitat, reduce impacts to habitat, and respond to monitoring thresholds triggers, all to move toward habitat goals and objectives. These actions are informed by the Park’s resource objectives, success criteria, and monitoring results. Actions include ongoing resource and maintenance activities, one-time landscape restoration and improvement projects, and other activities related to policy and regulatory compliance. Once a project or action has been selected for implementation, it will undergo assessment using the CDPR Project Evaluation Form to determine the necessary documentation for compliance with CEQA.
- **Monitoring Plan:** Monitoring programs provide a periodic evaluation of the condition of resources and inform adaptive management within the park. The plan includes monitoring programs related to vegetation communities and coverage, invasive plant species, special-status species’ habitats, wildlife diversity, and soils. Each program includes baseline data, the target objective, performance indicators to measure effectiveness, and analysis of methodology.

- Evaluate and Adapt: After evaluating the year's management actions and monitoring programs, the Heber Dunes SVRA staff may need to adjust the management actions and monitoring programs as part of the adaptive management process. This section includes the chain of command to approve management actions set for the following year and the requirements for the WHPP Annual Report. This will also allow for the review of baseline data gathered of the previous year and the mechanism for identifying and establishing new management objectives.

Best available science was applied through the development of the WHPP document based on the principles provided in the NRD Best Available Science Guidelines. The natural resource assessment was informed by multiple scientific information sources and comprehensive surveys while also acknowledging information gaps, bias, and uncertainties. Goals and objectives were based on the natural resource assessment and include measurable targets that consider state and regional conservation objectives. Monitoring programs include performance indicators to determine if objectives are being met and whether management actions are effective in achieving a particular objective. Future monitoring efforts are planned to fill knowledge gaps identified in the natural resource assessment. Due to the novelty of many aspects of the 2022 WHPP update, some objectives and monitoring programs targets will be developed and refined over the first three years of the WHPP as sufficient baseline data is gathered. The WHPP will undergo a 30-day public review period. An ADA compliant document is posted on the OHMVR website for the public and emailed to stakeholders, members of the scientific community, and other interested parties within the surrounding community.

Next Steps:

Upon conclusion of the 30-day public review period, which will start March 6th, comments will be reviewed and incorporated as appropriate. The WHPP will then be reviewed by NRD to confirm the use of BAS. After the BAS determination with NRD, legal and executive staff will undertake final reviews and OHMVRD's OHV Compliance Section's Environmental Program Manager, Jon O'Brien will grant approval. We anticipate a final, approved WHPP in summer of 2022. The WHPP will be reviewed and updated as needed every five years.

Review and comment.

Attachments

1. Draft 2022 Heber Dunes SVRA WHPP