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BLM to analyse public comments from dunes plan

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The public comment period having ended Friday for the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area draft business plan, the Bureau of Land Management nonetheless acknowledged a desire to continue to hear from the public.

The proposed business plan is calling for a permit and vendor fee increase for the 2013-2014 dunes season, with season visitor permits doubling in price from \$90 to \$180, weekly permits rising \$25 to \$40.

Vendor fees would also go from having three price structures in place corresponding to the weekend, midweek or a major holiday, to a flat rate for short- and long-term vending.

The bureau signaled that its next move would be to analyze the 236 comments that the agency had received via email, as well as the dozen or so made during a Desert Advisory Council meeting Saturday.

“We have some work ahead of us,” said DAC District Manager Teri Rami.

The need for further dialogue among stakeholders was also expressed by Rami, who noted she was able to detect an “undercurrent of dissatisfaction” from the public Saturday’.

The public had 45 days to comment on the draft plan, an increase from the 30-day time period originally suggested by the bureau upon the draft plan’s October release. The bureau has been operating the dunes area under a \$1 million deficit for the past three years, said El Centro field office manager Margaret Goodro.

The amount of funding the El Centro field office has seen from federal, state and the off-highway vehicle green sticker program has seen reductions over the past several years

The proposed fee increases would secure some \$3.6 million in funding for the ISDRA, considerably more than the \$2.5 million it currently operates under, the draft plan stated.

The possibility of a staggered fee increase may be taken into consideration, Goodro said. Yet the amount

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of services provided would correspond with the amount of revenue generated by such a staggered fee structure.

“We can’t keep incurring a deficit,” she said.

Critics of the draft plan have called for a clearer accounting of the manner in which the BLM is spending current funds. They also openly questioned the data that the BLM uses as the justification for a fee increase.

John Stewart, of the California Association of 4-Wheel Drive Clubs, said the business plan lacked “clarity of purpose and a clear definition of expectations.”

Noting the professional and personal respect that he had for local BLM personnel, Lloyd Misner said concerns with the draft plan remained.

“It hasn’t been presented with enough data to justify (the fee increase), Misner, a member of the Orange County ATV Association, said.

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