

ivpressonline.com/news/ivp-sand-dunes-law-enforcement-presence-viewed-as-essential-excessive-20121216,0,4914246.story

ivpressonline.com

Sand dunes' law enforcement presence viewed as essential, excessive

By JULIO MORALES

Staff Writer, Copy Editor

3:48 AM PST, December 16, 2012

As a longtime off-road enthusiast, Lloyd Misner clearly remembers the days when the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area was anything but the ideal family vacation.

Lawlessness seemed to reign over much of the area's 164,209 acres of sand dunes, which he described as "daunting and beautiful."

To his and many others' delight, substantial increases in law enforcement in the early 2000s succeeded in running off the crowds that were primarily going to "consume alcohol and be crazy and stupid."

"It has become a much more family-friendly environment," Misner, an Orange County resident, said.

In his opinion, the marked change in visitors also deserves a change in policing.

"We could go down a couple of levels of law enforcement," Misner said. "The problems aren't there anymore."

The Bureau of Land Management, which manages the Imperial dunes, points to the improvements in public safety at the dunes over the years as a success story. And in order to maintain current levels of law enforcement personnel, as well as provide general upkeep, maintenance and road repair, the BLM's proposed ISDRA business plan calls for an increase in visitor and vendor fees for the 2013-2014 season.

Heavy law enforcement presence

advertisement



MBA@UNC

ADVANCE YOUR MILITARY CAREER WITH AN MBA.

Earn your **MBA ONLINE** from UNC

UNC
KENAN-FLADLER
BUSINESS SCHOOL

In addition to not being thrilled about the proposed vendor fee increases, longtime vendor “Krazy” Keven Rice said the dunes’ heavy law enforcement presence is also likely to keep well-heeled visitors away.

From his vantage point along Gecko Road, Rice and fellow vendors said rangers can always be seen making traffic stops and writing tickets.

In their opinion, such proactive policing is no different from harassment.

“If you go to the playground and get beat up, you think you’re going to come back?” Rice asked.

Longtime duner Rob McLoud of La Quinta said that almost every time he sees a ranger they have a visitor pulled over.

“It’s good that they’re there for that purpose,” he said. “But it’s a little too proactive as far as law enforcement goes.”

McLoud said he was unaware of the proposed fee increases. While he has noted the additional bathrooms and Wash Road repairs over the years, he said he wasn’t clear about what else visitor fee revenue helps fund.

The BLM has been operating under a nearly \$1 million yearly deficit for the past few years, said El Centro Field Manager Margaret Goodro. Without the fee increase dune visitors can expect a drop in services.

Under the proposed plan, season passes would go from \$90 to \$180, while weekly passes would rise from \$25 to \$40. The last fee increase came about 10 years ago, Goodro said.

Public safety concerns

Public safety industry standards recommend having one law enforcement officer per 1,000 people. Considering holiday weekends can typically attract more than 100,000 visitors, some have said public safety staffing is woefully low for the dunes.

During the four-day Thanksgiving weekend, a total of about 30 BLM rangers and county sheriff’s deputies were on duty in the off-highway areas, Imperial County Sheriff’s Office Chief Deputy Steve Gutierrez said.

“There’s not that many officers when you think about it,” Gutierrez said. Having about 130 law enforcement personnel on hand would be ideal under industry standards.

Prior to 2001, BLM rangers solely enforced federal law, which focused mainly on regulatory violations rather than criminal violations. In 2001, the BLM and Sheriff’s Office entered into a memorandum of understanding in an effort to enhance public safety in the off-highway areas managed by the BLM, Gutierrez said.

The memorandum allowed BLM rangers who completed California Peace Officers Standards

Training requirements to enforce state laws and county ordinances. Since 2000, when law enforcement wasn't as proactive, most visitors have come to expect law enforcement to be especially vigilant.

"When you look at the number of citations and visitors, (the number of citations is) pretty low," he said. "We serve as a deterrent as well."

Public safety personnel responded to a total of 94 medical aid calls and made 47 arrests over the Thanksgiving holiday, according to data provided by the BLM.

The BLM typically brings in an additional 30 rangers to provide enhanced patrol during holiday weekends, BLM officials have stated. Of the \$2.986 million the BLM spent operating the dunes recreation area in fiscal 2011, law enforcement expenses totaled \$744,000, or about 25 percent, the draft business plan stated.

Under the proposed business plan, law enforcement would take up largest part of the budget at \$1.405 million, followed by providing for visitor services and needs, which would require \$950,000. Its 2003 business plan had identified an annual budget of \$6.1 million.

During holiday weekends the ICSO will have off-duty deputies work overtime to help provide additional support in the off-highway areas such as the sand dunes, Gutierrez said. Without the current level of BLM staffing, the county would shoulder a greater share of public safety incidents originating from the ISDRA.

Any decrease in BLM personnel is also going to directly affect how fast an injured person receives medical services, said Reach Air Services General Manager Rob Frick. Since the bureau is often the point of contact for many incidents in the dunes, it follows that the more difficult it becomes to connect with a ranger the more difficult it will be to receive medical aid.

"The people who will be most impacted are the duners," Frick said, referring to any reduced services resulting from a failure to increase permit fees.

The average dune visitor is a white male, more than 40 years old, who earns more than \$41,000 a year and drives 205 miles to get to ISDRA, according to a survey cited in the draft business plan. On average, each individual vehicle that visits ISDRA spends about \$1,182 per trip, the survey reported.

Public services concerns

As someone who enjoys the dunes and typically visits on a monthly basis, San Diego resident Terry Weiner in many ways is similar to the average duner, yet worlds apart. Since the time of her first encounter more than 10 years ago, the Algodones Dunes have held sway over her heart and pocketbook.

To get to the dunes, she spends a considerable amount of money on the commute and frequently ventures into the nearby gateway communities to shop and patronize eateries.

Noting that there are many like herself who visit the dunes simply for its unique flora and fauna, Weiner recently criticized the BLM at a meeting earlier this month for failing to properly promote the natural resources found throughout the dunes area.

Nor was she excited about the prospect of having to pay more for her outings.

“It’s not fun to pay \$25 to go hiking,” she told the gathered Desert Advisory Council of the BLM.

Noting the prevalence of off-roaders, Weiner, who is projects coordinator for the Desert Protective Council, said the current infrastructure prohibits nature lovers from conveniently and safely accessing the dunes.

She has come to think of the off-road activity that draws hundreds of thousands to the dunes each season as nothing more than “luxurious” and a “law enforcement sink.”

“What other kind of recreation requires that kind of law enforcement,” she asked.

Staff Writer, Copy Editor Julio Morales can be reached at 760-337-3415 or at jmorales@ivpressonline.com

[To comment on this story click here to be directed to Facebook.](#)

Copyright © 2012, Imperial Valley Press