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### BLM proposes to eliminate Imperial Sand Dunes season passes

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The latest proposal by the Bureau of Land Management to eliminate season passes for the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area is proving to be a tough sell among visitors and local officials.

The proposal was first announced, and criticized, at the Bureau's Desert Advisory Council subgroup meeting last month.

One local official and member of the subgroup expressed concern that the BLM's proposal failed to take into account the unique economic circumstances of many local residents.

"They're basically sticking it to the residents of the host county," said Bob Ham, the subgroup's county representative.

Because of their proximity, Valley residents with season passes can take frequent trips to the dunes without staying overnight, Ham said. Such numerous visits may well exceed the price of a season pass if individuals were forced to buy weekly passes for the upcoming season instead.

Under the proposal, visitors would have the option of purchasing a weekly pass for either \$35 or \$50, when bought off-site or on-site, respectively. Weekly passes currently cost \$25 or \$40 when bought off-site or on-site, respectively.

The reason the bureau is considering doing away with the season pass for the 2013-2014 season stems from suspicions users have been circulating their passes among friends for use, said BLM spokesperson David Briery.

The bureau is in the process of conducting an internal review of its business plan and has yet to decide on any permit fee changes. A final draft of the ISDRA business plan is expected May 31, after which the public has 30 days to comment.

The possibility of assigning season pass holders stickers that would be permanently affixed to a vehicle was discussed at the subgroup meeting and seemed to have found some proponents, Ham said.

"I think this particular meeting showed some receptivity on the part of the BLM," Ham said.

The business plan aims to address a \$1 million operating deficit ISDRA has faced the past three years, officials have said.

Since the draft business plan was made public in October, concerns have been expressed about the proposed fee increase.

Fee increases would likely have the biggest impact on young people who aren't as financially secure as others, said Lloyd Misner, former president of the Orange County ATV Association.

A longtime duner, Misner said he expects a drop in the number of minority visitors.

"It will have an impact on the local community," Misner said, referring to Valley residents. "Every penny that they have to expend will affect them as costs go up."

A 2006 survey of dunes visitors revealed that Latinos accounted for 13 percent of dunes visitors, with 83 percent of respondents identifying themselves as white. The survey also suggested that 24 percent of visitors make less than \$60,000 in annual income, with the rest earning more.

The latest proposal would allow the bureau to raise the fee revenue target of \$3,650,000 needed to operate ISDRA, according to a business plan summary found on the BLM's website. The proposed fees would allow the BLM to continue to provide the level of service they currently provide, which includes enhanced law enforcement and public safety personnel, road and campground maintenance and education efforts.

Fees have not been raised at the 164,000-acre recreation area since 2004. Failure to raise fees would result in a cut in services.

The visitation and fee permit data BLM uses to justify fee increases has been the focus of much debate since the business plan's release.

An analysis of the business plan done by a consulting firm hired by the American Sand Association suggests the draft business plan lacks certainty about the frequency of season permit holders and permit fee compliance. These two factors, along with more intimate knowledge about the characteristics of the customer base, are essential to determining an appropriate fee level.

"In other words, it is difficult to make an assessment at this time as to whether some visitors are paying too much, some too little, or whether too many are paying nothing at all," the report stated.

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