No increased fee at Dunes ... yet

BY JAMES GILBERT, SUN STAFF WRITER
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Off-roaders won't have to pay higher permit fees when they visit the Imperial Sand Dunes this season, at least for now.

According to David Briery of the Bureau of Land Management California Public Affairs office, the agency has withdrawn a proposal to increase the permit fees at the Dunes until the general public can comment on it.

"That doesn't mean we won't eventually have a rate increase," Briery said. "It is still possible there could be a fee increase next fall, but we are not sure at this point."

Briery said the agency, which is in charge of managing the Dunes, had scheduled to present their plan on May 13 to the California Recreation Resource Advisory Committee, but now they believe more public opinion is necessary before they move forward with it.

"We want to let the users of the recreation area have as much input as possible in how the fees are used," Briery said. "It is important for use to involve the public as much as possible."

It is anticipated that some level of fee increase will still be implemented for the 2009-2010 dune season.

BLM California Desert District Manager Steven Borchard added, "I feel that the public participation requirements outlined in the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA) have not been sufficiently fulfilled. I firmly believe that a robust, interactive and open dialogue between all stakeholders and constituents must happen before the BLM can present a proposal to the RRAC with any degree of confidence."

Prior to its announcement to withdraw its proposal, BLM had come under fire from several off-roading organizations for not informing the public of the proposed fee increase sooner.

American Sand Association spokesman Michael Sommer said they don't support a fee increase at this time, but added that they realize one is necessary to continue providing dunes the level of services they are accustomed to when visiting the dunes.

"In the end we are hoping our members will support a fee increase," Sommer said. "But the BLM proposed this out of the blue and didn't provide enough information about it to the public."

Sommer said the ASA board of directors is in the process of obtaining more information about the proposed fee increase to provide to its members.

Any future proposed fee increase will be communicated to the public and public input will be received before the proposal is submitted to the RRAC for approval, according to Briery.

What the agency plans to do now, according to Briery, is form a new Dunes advisory subgroup from its Imperial Sand Dunes Technical Review Team to help gather the public input.
input and assist in developing a revised fee collection program for the Dunes.

Briery added that the BLM has already had to decrease services due to budget shortfalls, and now that visitation is down, so are the revenues that are necessary to manage the Dunes, such as trash collection and law enforcement.

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