Pass prices for Imperial dunes may go up

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2013-04-29 17:18:00

Season passes for the Imperial Sand Dunes could be eliminated and weekly passes could climb by $10 as the Bureau of Land Management seeks to shore up falling revenues at the off-roading destination.

If approved, a proposal by the BLM to make weekly passes the only way to park inside the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area (ISDRA) at a cost of $35 or $50 a week, depending on point of purchase, would go into effect for the 2013-2014 season.

Land managers say the fee increase is necessary to maintain emergency medical services, search and rescue, law enforcement and infrastructure inside the 164,000-acre desert playground. It would be the first change to permit prices since 2004. As for the possibility of discontinuing the $90 or $120 season passes, agency spokesman David Briery said that is due to people sharing their passes with people who haven’t purchased one of their own.

"The fee program must be updated to address the gaps between the agency objectives, customer needs, and the resources available," reads a draft of the ISDRA’s business plan, which explains the BLM’s desire to restructure the fees. "Without a modification to the fee program, changes will occur that would lead to road and camping area closures, a decrease in visitor safety, and emergency calls without response from BLM staff."

Bob Mason is the president of the American Sand Association and a 40-year visitor to the Imperial Sand Dunes, but he’d see less of the dunes if these permit changes happen. Mason, who lives in Phoenix, already comes out less often than he used to.

A round trip is about $300; gas for his motorhome and his buggy are pricey for the retiree. This season he visited only twice, and higher permits would mean he’d cut that back even more.

"The people it’s really going to hurt are the locals” or anybody who goes often, said Mason. "If you’re going to go six or eight times a year without the seasonal pass, it gets pretty expensive."

Don Johnson would be one of those people. Johnson is a Yuma native who also now lives near Phoenix. Still, his trips are frequent enough — about eight to 10 a year — that he stores his vehicle and trailer here. He’s always had a season pass, as do his friends.

If he continued to visit the dunes as often, he’d spend $280 to $350 a year just in entrance fees, assuming he bought his permits off-site where they’re less expensive. That would more than triple or nearly quadruple their cost.

But if the proposed fees are passed, he simply would not come out that often.

They’d also further a divide between the more and less affluent duners, Johnson said.

"It’s going to keep splitting that up. There’s a certain amount of people who can afford it and have a lot of money invested in equipment and then there’s a group that comes out with tents and motorcycles and..."
anything they can kind of scrape together.

"It's great to see those people out enjoying public lands but they're definitely going to think about going someplace that doesn't have a permit, or just heading out to the desert."

Covering an area more than 40 miles long and averaging five miles wide, ISDRA provides the largest acreage of dune-oriented, motorized recreational opportunities in the U.S. It has far more acreage than the other 10 dune areas within 1,500 miles.

Off-roading is the most popular activity, but other users come to the striking desertscape to hike, ride horses and check out the wildlife and scenery. The area is open year-round, but the peak season is October through April.

The BLM last updated its business plan for the area in 2003. Since then, the agency said, the cost to manage ISDRA has increased while permit sales have decreased. BLM data shows visits climbed through 2006 but have been dropping steadily since 2007, likely due to the weak economy and less disposable income.

The agency said reduction in revenues is twofold: the decline in visitation and the shift to off-site permit sales. The option was put in place with the goal of reducing on-site management costs and bottlenecks, partnering with neighbor communities and improving customer service.

Permits are still sold on site, but at a higher price. The plan has been successful: Last year, about 85 percent of permits were purchased off site.

In 2006, visitation peaked at 1,464,580. In 2011, the most recent year available, it slid to 1,133,132. But it's declined at a lower rate than fee revenues, and now the fee program is not generating enough funds to fully support basic operations, the BLM said.

ISDRA is funded through a combination of appropriated federal funds, grants and user fees. User fees are by far the greatest component.

According to a summary of an updated version of the business plan released this month, the BLM needs $5 million a year to run ISDRA. About $920,000 of that is federal funding and about $430,000 is grants. Grants primarily come from California State Parks, but because it is uncertain year to year and has been dropping, it cannot be considered a reliable source of income.

That leaves the BLM with an approximate fee revenue target of $3.65 million.

Fee revenue peaked at $3.36 million in 2009 after the addition of off-site purchase points. As visitation has dropped and more of those who are coming buy their permits off site, revenues fell to $2.5 million in 2011.

"Reductions in revenues would likely cause reductions in services including: closing major access roads and camping areas, closing vault toilets and removing trash collection (which) could cause health and safety concerns, air quality could be degraded due to increased dust, and emergency services could be reduced," reads the ISDRA draft plan.

Briery said the BLM will issue a final draft of the plan in late May and open a 30-day public comment period. The plan will then come before the California Recreation Resource Advisory Council in August for approval.

Mason, the American Sand Association (ASA) president, said his group wants to see finer details from the BLM on why the higher fees would be needed. He pointed to a study commissioned by the ASA that concluded that the draft plan, as issued last August, lacked transparency, used inconsistent if inaccurate data and didn’t sufficiently address the impact on gateway communities.

"One of the primary hurdles of the (business plan) is the scarcity of detailed, documented data upon which to base key decisions," read the report, completed by Phoenix-based economic development consultant

McClure Consulting.

"If we accept for the sake of discussion that this is unavoidable, at least at the present time, limited data increase the need for the (business plan) to lay out very clearly what it is attempting to accomplish, given these limitations, and then how those limitations will be addressed going forward."

Johnson, Mason's fellow duner, said users would have been reasonable if land managers proposed a smaller, justified increase.

If permit prices go up, Johnson anticipates more of what some people already do now: parking at the no-permit-necessary areas north of the dunes and taking a longer ride in to the favored areas. If more people do that, more will go off-trail and create new paths, and more people will ride where there are fewer systems in place.

"Whether they go legally or illegally they're going find places to enjoy their toys, and that's going to become something else that's going to have to be managed," Johnson said.

Nicole Gilles, ASA executive director and a Brawley resident who visits the dunes about once a month, said the majority of the ASA's members visit the Imperial Sand Dunes and the group has long been an "enthusiastic partner" of the BLM.

But she agrees with Mason on the need for a clear explanation on the need to change fees. She said she has met with local, regional and state land managers but so far hasn't gotten the level of detail she'd like.

"We will not support any kind of an increase in the permit fee until the BLM can show us and substantiate what the fees are being used for," she said.

As an active duner and former chief executive officer of the Brawley Chamber of Commerce, Gilles knows that duner dollars go far in the nearby towns.

According to the BLM, a study of the 2005-2006 season estimated that visitors spent as much as $1.66 billion total on their trips. About $577 million to $1.28 billion of that was in "gateway" cities such as Yuma and Brawley.

But times are still tough. Gas is still expensive. Gilles said the BLM says itself that visitation is going down, and this proposed change would make that worse.

"The amount of people that are going out there to recreate is decreasing," she said. "It doesn't seem like it would be prudent for them to do an increase of this magnitude at this time."

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