



Ungulate Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement

Newsletter 2 (Preliminary Draft Alternatives)

September 2014

Dear Friends,

Thank you for your continued interest in the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. I once again invite you to play a vital role in the ungulate management planning process by providing your input and feedback on the information contained in this newsletter. The newsletter provides an update on the status of the planning process and includes the plan's purpose, need, and objectives; preliminary alternative concepts; and management tools being considered.

As you may recall, a newsletter was distributed in the fall of 2011 and the park received comments on the scope of this Ungulate Management Plan at that time. All comments received during public scoping were considered by the park. Most comments focused on issues the National Park Service (NPS) should consider when evaluating the possible establishment of a semi-free ranging bison population.

The summary of public comments can be accessed at the NPS's Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) website. Go to the following web address <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/grsa-ungulates> and click "Document List" and then click "Public Scoping

Comment Summary." If you do not have access to a computer, a hard copy of the summary can also be obtained by contacting (719) 378-6395.

Over the past few years the park has developed a range of preliminary alternative concepts and I appreciate you taking the time to review the information on the following pages and providing your thoughts and suggestions. Your feedback would be most beneficial to the planning process if received within the 60-day comment period, which closes on November 2, 2014. Over the coming months, your comments will be analyzed and considered as part of preparing the draft plan and environmental impact statement (DEIS), which we plan to release for your review and comment during the summer/fall of 2015. Your input is important and valued and helps shape the future management of elk and bison in the Park and Preserve. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Lisa Carrico, Superintendent
Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve

Public Open House Schedule

Tuesday, September 16, 2014

6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

Baca Grande POA Meeting Hall

68575 County Road T

Crestone, CO 81131

Wednesday, September 17, 2014

6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

Alamosa Recreation Center

2222 Old Sanford Road

Alamosa, CO 81101



Key Points

- The NPS is pursuing the voluntary acquisition of the Medano Ranch from The Nature Conservancy, which currently manages a 1,700-head bison herd. This plan is intended to determine whether to have bison at the Park and Preserve in the future and if so, how to manage them.
- Concerns have been expressed about the size and distribution of the elk herd and this plan considers the use of monitoring and a suite of tools to manage the herd.
- The Park and Preserve lies adjacent to the Baca National Wildlife Refuge and other public lands. The NPS has been working collaboratively with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as they prepare a draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan that, amongst other topics, considers alternatives for future elk and bison management on the Baca National Wildlife Refuge. The NPS will continue to work closely with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other federal, state and local agencies throughout the planning process.
- While there is considerable and compelling interest in the management of bison across a broad, multi-agency landscape, the NPS can only implement management actions within its own administrative boundaries.
- Public hunting is not authorized within the Park, but public hunting is allowed in the Preserve, as authorized by Congress, and is managed by Colorado Parks and Wildlife.



What is the Purpose of the Plan?

The purpose of this plan/EIS is to determine the appropriate future management of elk and bison within Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve that supports long-term protection of resources and is compatible with conditions and management activities across the broader eastern San Luis Valley landscape, to the extent practicable.

Why is this Plan Needed?

This planning effort is needed because:

- Elk and bison are currently on the landscape and there is no plan to address their management and impacts, both positive and negative, in support of desired habitat conditions.
- Bison are currently managed by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) on the Medano Ranch and portions of the Park and a decision is needed to determine whether to have bison at the Park and Preserve in the future and if so, how to manage them.
- The Department of the Interior (DOI) Bison Conservation Initiative and National Park Service Call to Action (Back Home on the Range), combined with additional information about bison and bison habitat in the San Luis Valley, require a reexamination of the potential for bison conservation following the 2007 General Management Plan (GMP).

Plan Objectives

Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat

- Identify effective management tools and develop a framework to guide how and when they would be used
- Support the attainment of desired habitat conditions as specified in this plan
- Enhance agency understanding of habitat selection and the influence of herbivory

Visitor Experience

- Enhance public awareness and understanding of the ecological role of dominant ungulates on the landscape

Park Management/Operations

- Develop and implement an adaptive management program that includes monitoring and learning about resource conditions over time

What Preliminary Alternative Concepts is the Park Considering for the Ungulate Management Plan?

Based on purpose, need, and objectives, as well as past planning efforts and public comments received during scoping, the Park has developed the following range of preliminary alternative concepts.

No-Action Alternative: Continuation of current management direction, 2007 GMP and Record of Decision

- TNC continues to graze bison on Medano Ranch prior to government acquisition
- Upon acquisition, remove bison herd and bison fencing
- No elk management (GMP called for an Elk Management Plan)

Alternative Concept 1: No Bison/Active Elk Management

- TNC bison removed if/when NPS acquires Medano Ranch
- Current bison fence removed
- Active elk management tools utilized in phased approach: 1) Non-lethal tools used first (e.g., hazing, fencing), 2) Limited lethal removal for dispersal

Alternative Concept 2: Existing Bison Herd/Comprehensive Elk Management

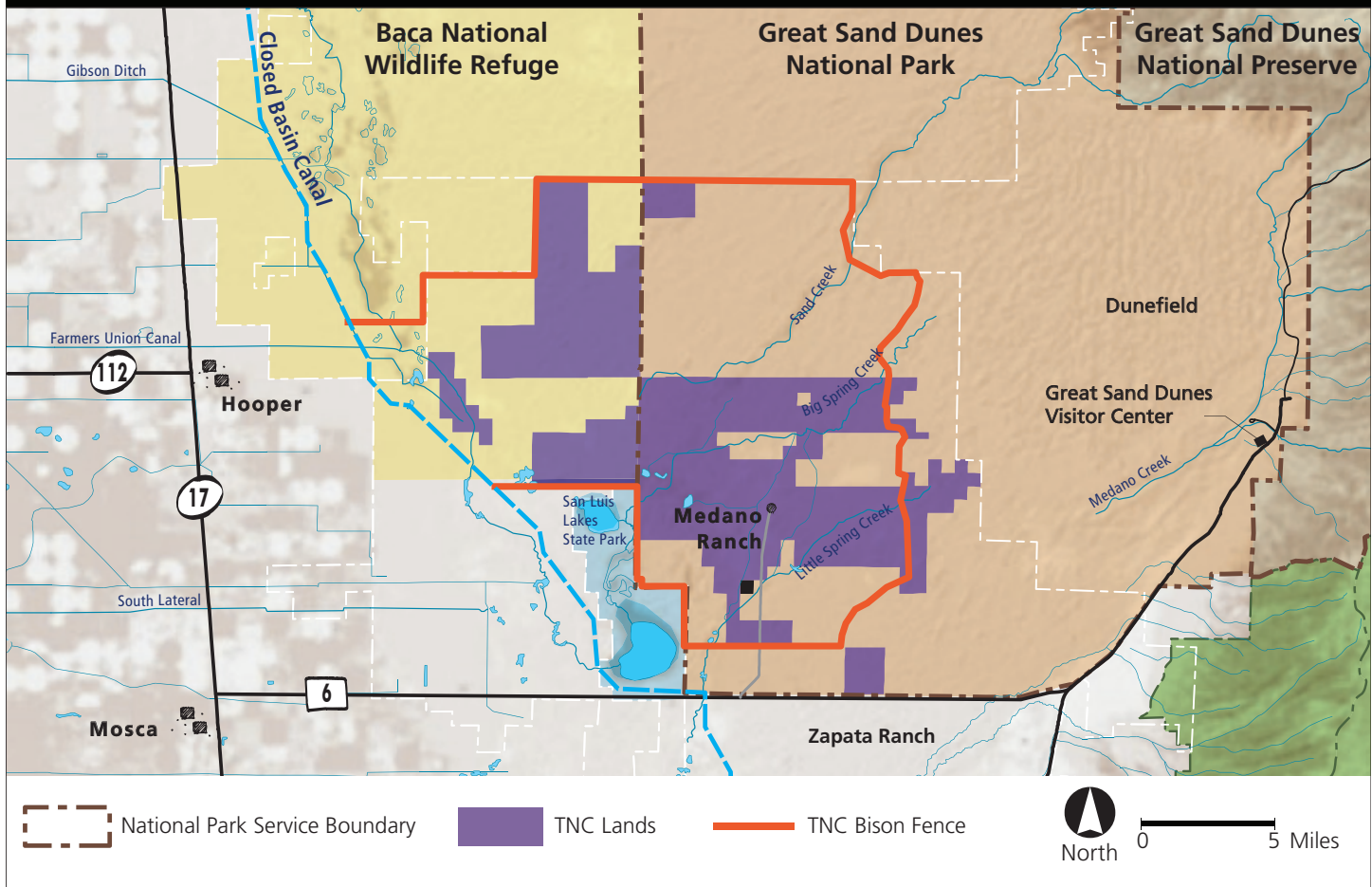
- TNC bison remain if/when NPS acquires Medano Ranch
- Existing bison fence remains
- New fence constructed on western boundary to retain bison on NPS land within existing bison fence (see map on page 4)
- Bison managed within a population range as resource conditions allow (e.g., 400-1,000)
- Active bison population management required
- All retained elk management tools available for use in phased approach: 1) Non-lethal tools used first (e.g., hazing, fencing), 2) Limited lethal removal for dispersal, 3) Lethal take to reduce population could be utilized if needed

Alternative Concept 3: Conservation Herd/Comprehensive Elk Management

- NPS acquires Medano Ranch with zero TNC bison
- Introduce small conservation bison herd of outside origin (e.g., 25-100)
- Bison introduced would be tested and report negative for diseases of regulatory concern
- Existing bison fence remains
- Initially, new fence constructed on western boundary to retain bison on NPS land within existing bison fence (see map on page 4)
- Expand bison fencing to maximize bison range on NPS land during the life of the plan
- Bison managed within a low-density population range as resource and social conditions allow (e.g., 100-400)
- Minimum human handling/intervention except as needed to protect resources
- Potential to expand bison range beyond NPS borders with willing neighbors on adjacent lands
- Develop interpretation/education opportunities along Alamosa County Road Lane 6 North (e.g., vehicle pullouts)
- All retained elk management tools available for use in phased approach: 1) Non-lethal tools used first (e.g., hazing, fencing), 2) Limited lethal removal for dispersal, 3) Lethal take to reduce population could be utilized if needed

Existing Bison Management Area

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



What Tools are Being Considered for Bison and Elk Management?

Bison Management Tools

- Fencing to exclude bison from certain areas
- Hazing (e.g., non-lethal rounds, dogs, horses, motorized vehicles, helicopters) with the potential for joint-operations with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Colorado Parks and Wildlife
- Roundup, use existing handling facilities and translocate (vaccinate prior to translocation)
- Limited lethal removal by sharpshooters for population management*
- Fertility control
- Fencing to retain bison on NPS land
- Public hunting in Preserve only if State statutes and/or regulations change during life of plan

Elk Management Tools

- Fencing to exclude elk from certain areas
- Hazing (e.g., non-lethal rounds, dogs, horses, motorized vehicles, helicopters) with the potential for joint-operations with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Colorado Parks and Wildlife
- Public hunting per State regulations (Preserve only)
- Lethal removal by sharpshooters for dispersal*
- Lethal removal by sharpshooters for population management*

Tools Not Included in Alternatives

The NPS does not intend to carry forward the following management tools for detailed analysis in the DEIS.

- Public hunting within the National Park
- Predator introduction (e.g., wolves, grizzly bears)
- Fertility control for elk
- Construct bison fence around entire Park and Preserve
- Gather and translocate live elk

*NPS or authorized agents (NPS would closely consider results from monitoring as well as partner perspectives to determine effective amount of take to protect Park resources)

Adaptive Management

Future management under any of the action alternatives (#1, #2, and #3) would occur through an adaptive management process. This would include an on-going monitoring component to assess indicators and whether a threshold has been reached that triggers management action. After action has been taken, continued monitoring would determine the success of the action, whether additional action is needed, and would facilitate learning over time.



Wilderness and Minimum Requirements Analysis

There are two designated wilderness areas within the Park and Preserve - the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness (39,686 acres) and the Great Sand Dunes Wilderness (35,955 acres). In addition, the Record of Decision for the General Management Plan/Wilderness Study/EIS completed in 2007 identified lands to be forwarded to the NPS Director for a wilderness designation proposal, including portions of the former Baca Ranch and the Medano Ranch (53,013 acres). Per agency policy, these lands are managed to protect their wilderness character. The Ungulate Management Plan will be developed in accordance with the Wilderness Act of 1964 and agency policy, and will include a minimum requirements analysis.

How to Comment

There are several ways to provide comments:

1. Submit comments electronically (preferred method) by visiting <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/grsa-ungulates> and clicking on "Open For Comment."
2. Submit comments at one of the two scheduled public open houses.
3. Submit written comments at the park's visitor center or by mail to the address below.

**Superintendent
Great Sand Dunes National Park
11500 State Highway 150
Mosca, CO 81146**

To be most useful to the planning process, please submit your comments within the 60-day comment period, which closes on November 2, 2014. Comments made by individuals or organizations on behalf of other individuals or organizations will not be accepted. In addition, comments will not be accepted by fax, email, or in any other way than those specified above.

Please include your full name and address and/or email address with the comments so we may add you to our mailing list for future notices about this process. You should be aware that your entire comment—including personal identifying information such as your address, phone number, and e-mail address—may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.

Questions to Consider

1. Is this a sufficient range of alternatives? If not, what other alternative(s) should the NPS consider?
2. Are there specific elements of the preliminary alternatives, including management tools, which should be changed? If yes, how would you change them?
3. What do you like and/or dislike about the preliminary alternatives?
4. What issues should the NPS consider when evaluating future bison and elk management?

Note: an "issue" describes the relationship between actions and environmental (natural, cultural, and socioeconomic) resources. Issues are usually problems that either the "no action" alternative or current situation has caused, or that any of the proposed alternatives might cause, but they may also be questions, concerns, or other relationships, including beneficial ones.



National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

**Great Sand Dunes National Park
and Preserve**

11500 Highway 150
Mosca, CO 81146-9798

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Next Steps/Schedule

The NPS is preparing this plan/EIS in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), which requires federal agencies to analyze impacts to the human environment for any major federal action. Important steps in the NEPA process and an anticipated timeline are as follows:

Milestone	Anticipated Date
Release Draft Ungulate Management Plan/EIS for public review 60-day comment period and public meetings	Summer/Fall 2015
Release Final Ungulate Management Plan/EIS	Summer/Fall 2016
Record of Decision	Fall/Winter 2016