

July 2004

Issue 4



# Great Sand Dunes

## *National Park and Preserve General Management Plan Newsletter*

Dear Friends,

We are now moving into an exciting phase of the general management plan process—developing and describing management zones and alternative management concepts for the future of the park. Over the summer, in addition to reading and compiling your comments on this newsletter, we will be gathering other information to help us more fully develop alternatives for the park's future. We will be evaluating possibilities and limitations for the future use of areas of the park. For example, we plan to examine potential trailhead areas and access routes, and discuss whether certain areas deserve special protection due to sensitive resources.

We are very interested in your reactions to the alternative management concepts and management zones in this newsletter. Please look them over and send your comments, concerns, and suggestions on the enclosed comment form. You can also write to the planning team at the address below or visit our Web site (<http://planning.nps.gov/plans.cfm>).

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Thank you for your continued interest in the future of the Great Sand Dunes. We will continue to consider your ideas as we develop the general management plan and wilderness study.

Sincerely,

*Steve W Chaney*



Steve W. Chaney, Superintendent  
Great Sand Dunes National Monument and Preserve

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## *Desired Conditions (Goals)*

Desired conditions articulate the ideal future conditions that the National Park Service is striving to attain. They provide guidance for fulfilling the park's purpose and for protecting the park's fundamental resources and values. To emphasize this, we've organized the desired conditions statements by fundamental resource and value *type* (dunes and diversity, human connections, visitor opportunities, and "other"). A next step will be to describe strategies that the National Park Service may use to achieve the desired conditions.

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### *Dunes and Diversity—Desired Conditions*

**Ecosystem Management:** The National Park Service is a leader in resource stewardship and conservation of ecosystem values within and outside the park. The dunes system is managed from an ecosystem perspective, considering both internal and external factors affecting visitor use, environmental quality, and resource stewardship. Management decisions about ecosystems are based on ongoing scholarly and scientific information. Resources and visitation are managed in view of the ecological and social conditions of the park and surrounding area. Park managers adapt to changing ecological and social conditions and are partners in regional land planning and management. The dunes system shows no lasting physical damage caused by humans.

**Natural Resources and Diversity:** The resources and processes of Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve retain their ecological integrity. Natural wind, sand, and water processes are understood and allowed to function. Management decisions about natural resources are based on ongoing scholarly and scientific information. Park resources and values are protected through collaborative efforts with neighbors and partners. Human impacts on resources are monitored and harmful effects are minimized or eliminated.

Biologically diverse native communities are protected and restored when possible. Particularly sensitive communities such as sandsheet wetlands and tundra are

closely monitored and protected. Endemic species and habitats are fully protected, non-native species are controlled or eliminated, and native species are re-introduced when conditions allow. Genetic integrity of native species is protected. Threatened and endangered species recovery is successful. Natural fire regimes are understood and supported. Grazing by domestic and wildlife species is managed so that natural plant and animal communities and cultural values are protected. Research natural areas may be designated to provide representative areas for long-term ecological baseline studies.

**Air Quality:** Class I air quality at Great Sand Dunes is maintained or enhanced. Scenic views and night skies, which are vital to the visitor experience, are substantially unimpaired.

**Water Quality and Quantity:** Water quality and quantity at Great Sand Dunes reflect natural conditions and support natural, recreational, and administrative uses. Outstanding water quality is protected and preserved. Water rights are managed to protect natural systems. Existing water rights are used, maintained, and respected.

**Wildlife Management:** Natural wildlife populations and systems are understood and perpetuated. Natural fluctuations in populations are permitted to occur. Natural influences are mimicked, if necessary. The National Park Service works with neighbors and partners to achieve mutually beneficial goals.

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### *Human Connections—Desired Conditions*

**Cultural Resources:** Cultural resources at Great Sand Dunes, especially archeological and ethnographic resources, are identified, evaluated, managed, and protected within their broader context. Visitors and employees recognize and understand the value of the park's cultural resources. Management decisions about cultural resources are based on

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ongoing scholarly and scientific information.

Culturally scarred trees are managed to preserve their vitality. The historic integrity of properties listed on (or eligible for listing on) the National Register of Historic Places is protected. Human impacts on cultural resources are monitored and harmful effects are minimized or eliminated.

### **Relations with Private and Public Organizations, Adjacent Landowners, and Governmental Agencies:**

Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve is managed holistically as part of a greater ecological, social, economic, and cultural system. Positive relations are maintained with adjacent landowners, surrounding communities, academia, and private and public groups that affect, and are affected by, the park. Great Sand Dunes is managed proactively to resolve external issues and concerns, to provide opportunities for appropriate independent research, and to ensure that park values are not compromised.

### **Relations between American Indian Tribes and Great Sand Dunes National Park:**

The National Park Service and tribes culturally affiliated with Great Sand Dunes maintain positive, productive, government-to-government relationships. Park managers and staff respect the viewpoints and needs of the tribes, promptly address any conflicts that occur, and consider American Indian values in park management and operation. Traditional ethnographic needs and uses are understood, and those uses that are consistent with protection of park resources and values are allowed to occur.

**Contemporary Community Ties:** Strong personal ties to the Great Sand Dunes and appropriate uses are recognized, fostered, and maintained. National Park Service staff, volunteers, and concession employees reflect the cultural diversity of the San Luis Valley and the region.

### **Visitor Opportunities—Desired Conditions**

**Visitor Use and Experience:** Visitors from diverse backgrounds can experience a range of opportunities consistent with the purpose, significance, and fundamental resources and values of the park. Most visitors understand and appreciate the purpose and significance of the park and value their stewardship role in preserving natural and cultural features. They actively contribute to the park's preservation through appropriate use and behavior. Park programs and services are accessible to all audiences. All visitors understand park policies for use. Conflicts between different user groups are minimized.

Visitor use levels and activities are consistent with preserving the park's purpose, significance, and fundamental resources and values. Visitor use is also managed to minimize impacts on neighboring private and public lands. Management decisions are based on scholarly and scientific information. When such information is lacking, managers make decisions based on the best available information, adapting as new information becomes available. Regional recreation opportunities are coordinated among agencies for public benefit and ease of use.

**Visitor Information, Interpretation, and Education:** Interpretation and education services at Great Sand

Dunes facilitate intellectual and emotional connections between visitors and park resources. Interpretive programs foster understanding of park resources, resource stewardship, and build a local and national constituency. Outreach programs through schools, organizations, and partnerships build connections to the park. Curriculum-based education inspires student understanding and resource stewardship. Information about public use opportunities is coordinated among neighboring agencies for public benefit and ease of use. Visitors receive adequate information to orient themselves to visitor opportunities and have a safe, enjoyable visit.

**View Sheds:** Key scenic vistas are identified and protected. Park managers work with neighbors, local communities, and land managers to preserve scenic values.

**Night Sky:** The naturally dark night sky is preserved. Artificial light sources within and outside of the park do not impair opportunities to see the moon, stars, planets, and other celestial features.

**Natural Sounds:** The natural soundscape is preserved. Visitors have opportunities throughout most of the park to experience natural sounds. The sounds of civilization are generally confined to developed areas.

*(Continued on page 4)*

## Desired Conditions—Goals

(Continued from page 3)

**Wilderness:** Wilderness areas retain their wilderness characteristics and values. Visitors find ample opportunities for primitive recreation and solitude. Wilderness areas are affected primarily by the forces of nature, and signs of people remain substantially unnoticeable. Visitors value and support wilderness preservation.

**Park Accessibility:** Great Sand Dunes' buildings, facilities, programs, and services are accessible to and usable by all people, including those with disabilities. New and renovated facilities are designed and constructed to be universally accessible. Visitors with limited mobility have opportunities to touch sand, experience the dunes, and enjoy representative portions of the backcountry.

### Other Desired Conditions

**Land Protection:** Impacts from rights-of-way, inholdings, private mineral interests, agricultural uses, and other valid existing rights are minimized to protect park resources and values.

**Research:** The National Park Service works with partners to learn about natural and cultural resources and associated values. Research priorities for the park and preserve are aligned with its purpose, significance, and fundamental resources and values.

**Facilities and Services:** Great Sand Dunes facilities and development are the minimum necessary to serve visitor needs and protect park resources for the long term. Visitor and management facilities are compatible

with natural processes and surrounding landscapes, aesthetically pleasing, and functional. Commercial services are limited to those that are necessary and appropriate for public enjoyment and that are consistent with park purposes.

Housing is managed to ensure an adequate level of protection for park resources, visitors, employees, and government property and to provide necessary services. Adequate response (equipment and people) for visitor needs, protection, search and rescue, fire management, and safety is available. All decisions regarding park operations, facilities management, and development at Great Sand Dunes—from initial concept through design and construction—reflect principles of resource conservation and sustainability.

## Draft Management Zones

One of the tools we use in park planning is management zoning. Management zones identify how different areas of the park could be managed to achieve a variety of resource conditions and serve visitor or operational needs. Different actions would be taken by the National Park Service in different zones with regard to the types and levels of uses and facilities.

The planning team has described seven draft management zones that could be appropriate to various areas in Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. Ideas for the range of zones came from park visitor responses to previous newsletters, from the Great Sand Dunes National Park Advisory Council, and from park staff. In visualizing different alternatives for future park conditions and management, these zones could be placed in different locations or configurations on the ground. Zoning configurations could be similar or different from existing conditions. An overview of the draft management zones is provided on the following pages.

## *Overview of Management Zones*

**Frontcountry:** These are higher use areas providing structured opportunities to enjoy and learn about the park. Scenic driving, taking short walks, and attending interpretive programs are common visitor activities. Facilities include visitor centers, paved roads, formal campgrounds, surfaced trails, operational facilities, etc. Encounters with others are likely. Natural processes and landscapes may be altered or manipulated to restore damaged areas, to preserve or maintain cultural resources, or to direct visitor use to avoid widespread resource impacts. This zone occurs in non-wilderness areas.



**Dunes Play:** These are natural areas for visitor enjoyment of the dunes and Medano Creek, two of the park's prime resources. Sand and water play and climbing the high dunes are common visitor activities. Encounters with others are likely. The only facilities are small signs. Camping is not permitted. Lasting evidence of recreational use is not apparent (evidence is temporary). This zone occurs primarily in wilderness areas.



**Backcountry Access:** These are generally unpaved vehicular travel routes or trailheads from which backcountry adventure or natural/wild areas can be accessed. The routes are surrounded by mostly natural landscapes and conditions. There is a low expectation for solitude during busy visitor periods. Parts of the natural landscape may be altered to protect resources from impacts (e.g., installing culverts under roads). This zone occurs in non-wilderness areas.



**Guided Learning:** In these areas, visitor use is permitted only with a guide or escort to protect particularly sensitive resources or to provide for visitor safety. Visitor activities include guided interpretive and educational tours on horseback, by foot, or (in non-wilderness areas) by vehicle. Parts of the natural landscape may be altered (e.g., water bars and privies installed) to protect resources from negative impacts. This zone occurs in wilderness or non-wilderness areas.



## *Draft Management Zones*



**Backcountry Adventure:** These are natural landscapes with a few facilities such as designated trails and backcountry campsites. There is a low expectation for solitude during busy visitor periods. Hiking, backcountry camping, and horseback riding are common activities. Resources may be manipulated, when necessary, to restore damaged areas, to preserve or maintain cultural resources, or to direct visitor use to avoid resource impacts. This zone occurs in wilderness or non-wilderness areas.



**Natural/Wild:** These are relatively remote, natural areas with primitive, if any, facilities. They provide great opportunities for challenge and adventure. The expectation for solitude is high. Hiking, backcountry camping, horseback riding, and hunting (preserve only) are common activities. These are trail-less areas where natural and cultural resources are generally unaltered and unaffected by human influences. This zone occurs in wilderness or non-wilderness areas.



**Administrative:** The primary purpose of these areas is to support management and administration of the park (or other mandated activities such as the Closed Basin Project). General visitation would not occur. Natural processes and resources may be altered to support park or other operations; the degree of alteration would be dependent on need. This zone occurs in non-wilderness areas.

# Great Sand Dunes

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## *Update: Wilderness Review*

The planning team has evaluated lands within the expanded park boundary for suitability as wilderness (i.e., to see if they meet the minimum size and character requirements for wilderness). In preparation for the wilderness study that will accompany the general management plan, we have identified three general options for additional designated wilderness within Great Sand Dunes National Park. These options are described above in the “Alternative Management Concepts” section.

Once we review public comment on these general options for new wilderness, we will develop more detailed wilderness alternatives for the wilderness study. The wilderness study will evaluate the wilderness alternatives and gather public input to decide whether lands identified in the wilderness suitability assessment should be proposed for wilderness designation. A wilderness study results in either a wilderness proposal for some or all of the suitable lands, or a proposal that none of the lands be recommended as wilderness.

If the preferred alternative eventually proposes that wilderness be recommended, the National Park Service submits the recommendation to the Secretary of Interior, who can submit it to the president, who can, in turn, submit it to Congress. Only Congress can designate wilderness, and Congress is under no obligation to act on a wilderness recommendation.

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## *Update: Advisory Council*

The Great Sand Dunes National Park Advisory Council is continuing to help with development of the general management plan for the national park and preserve. The council’s sixth meeting was held on April 5, 6, and 7 in Alamosa, Colorado. At this meeting the advisory council worked to develop draft desired conditions, management zones, and alternative management concepts for the general management plan. The work of the advisory council was then refined by the National Park Service planning team to produce the desired conditions, management zones, and management concepts drafts in this newsletter.

The National Park Service feels fortunate to have the help of the advisory council. This group of knowledgeable, dedicated volunteers has given generously of their time and provided many useful ideas for the budding general management plan.

A tentative schedule for future advisory council meetings is provided on page 12. More information about the advisory council and its activities is available via the Great Sand Dunes Web site—follow the general management planning link:  
[www.nps.gov/grsa/press\\_room.htm](http://www.nps.gov/grsa/press_room.htm).



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## *Alternative Management Concepts*

The general management plan process requires assessing alternative ways to manage the park in the future. Each alternative is built around an underlying concept that describes a possible direction for the future. We have identified three alternative management concepts for the park that incorporate ideas from the public, the advisory council, and park staff. Each concept also provides an idea of how much new wilderness, if any, would be proposed for designation within the national park.

Each concept will guide different management zone configurations or “alternative futures” for the Great Sand Dunes. Following public reaction to the concepts described here, the planning team will revise the management concepts. A management zoning configuration and more specific actions and ideas will be developed for each concept. We anticipate sharing the resulting draft alternatives and requesting your input sometime next winter.

Each alternative must be evaluated against the park’s existing conditions and management direction. Eventually, a preferred alternative will be selected that may be very similar to one of the alternatives, may incorporate elements from several alternatives, or may grow out of an entirely new concept.

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### *Dunefield Focus—Maximum Wildness Concept*

In this alternative, most visitor use and visitor activities would be focused in or near the eastern edge of the dunefield. Most of the rest of the park and preserve would remain wild and undeveloped, allowing natural processes to continue with minimal human influence. The natural/wild management zone would predominate. Backcountry areas would be primitive and rugged, providing outstanding opportunities for solitude and adventure. This alternative would have the greatest amount of wilderness proposed for designation.

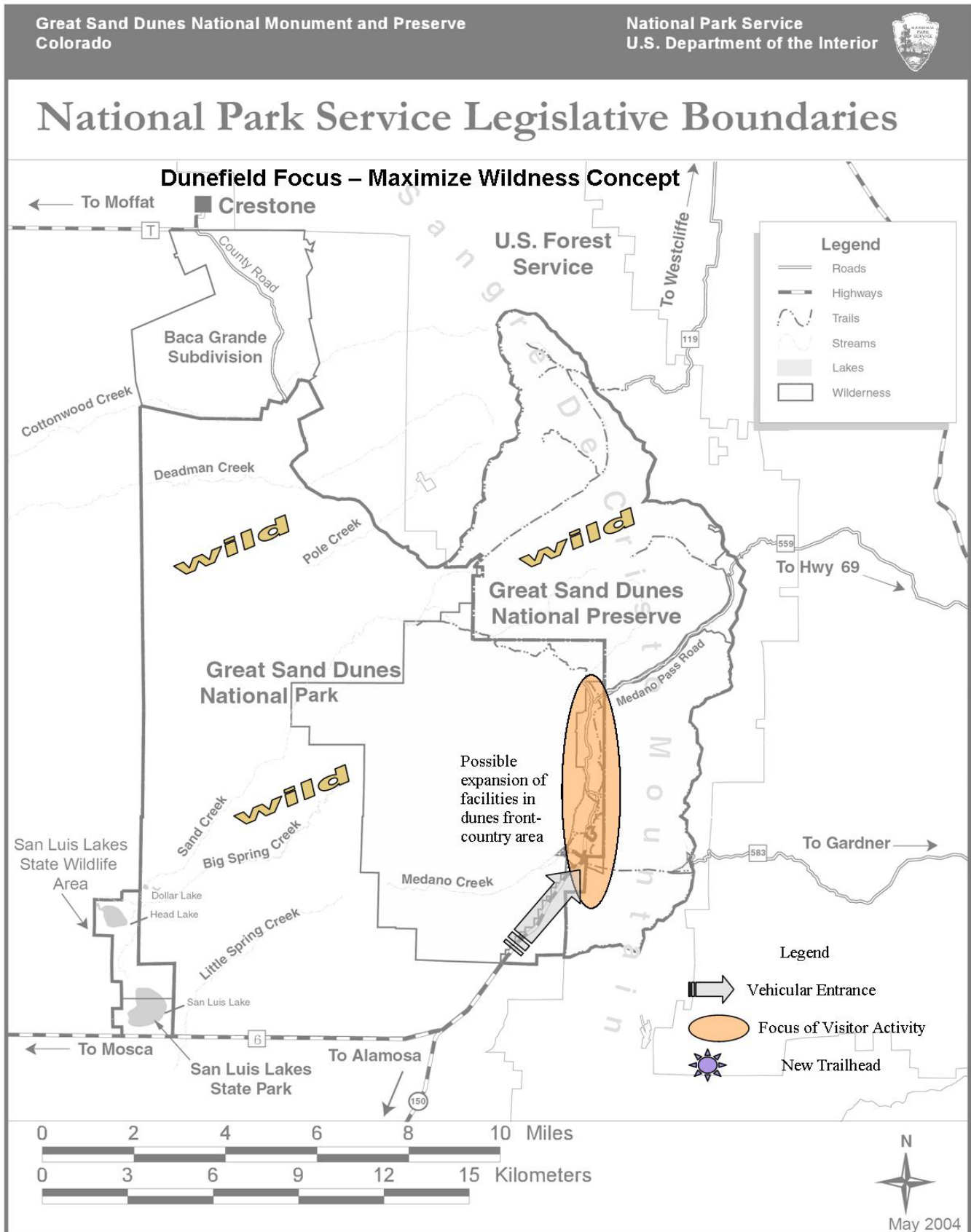
Historic structures in backcountry areas (including the Medano Ranch) would be allowed to gradually decay, or they would be documented and removed. Although existing trails and trailheads would be maintained, there would be no new visitor access routes into the park or preserve, and no new trails or trailheads would be provided. Domestic grazing within the park (including bison) would be phased out. Dogs would be permitted only in parking areas and campgrounds and must be leashed. All-terrain vehicles would not be allowed within the national park or preserve. Most visitors would continue to visit the main dunefield area (main park road, visitor center, dunes parking lot, and picnic area). Facilities may be expanded within the frontcountry if facility capacity is reached (i.e., the parking lot fills) too often.

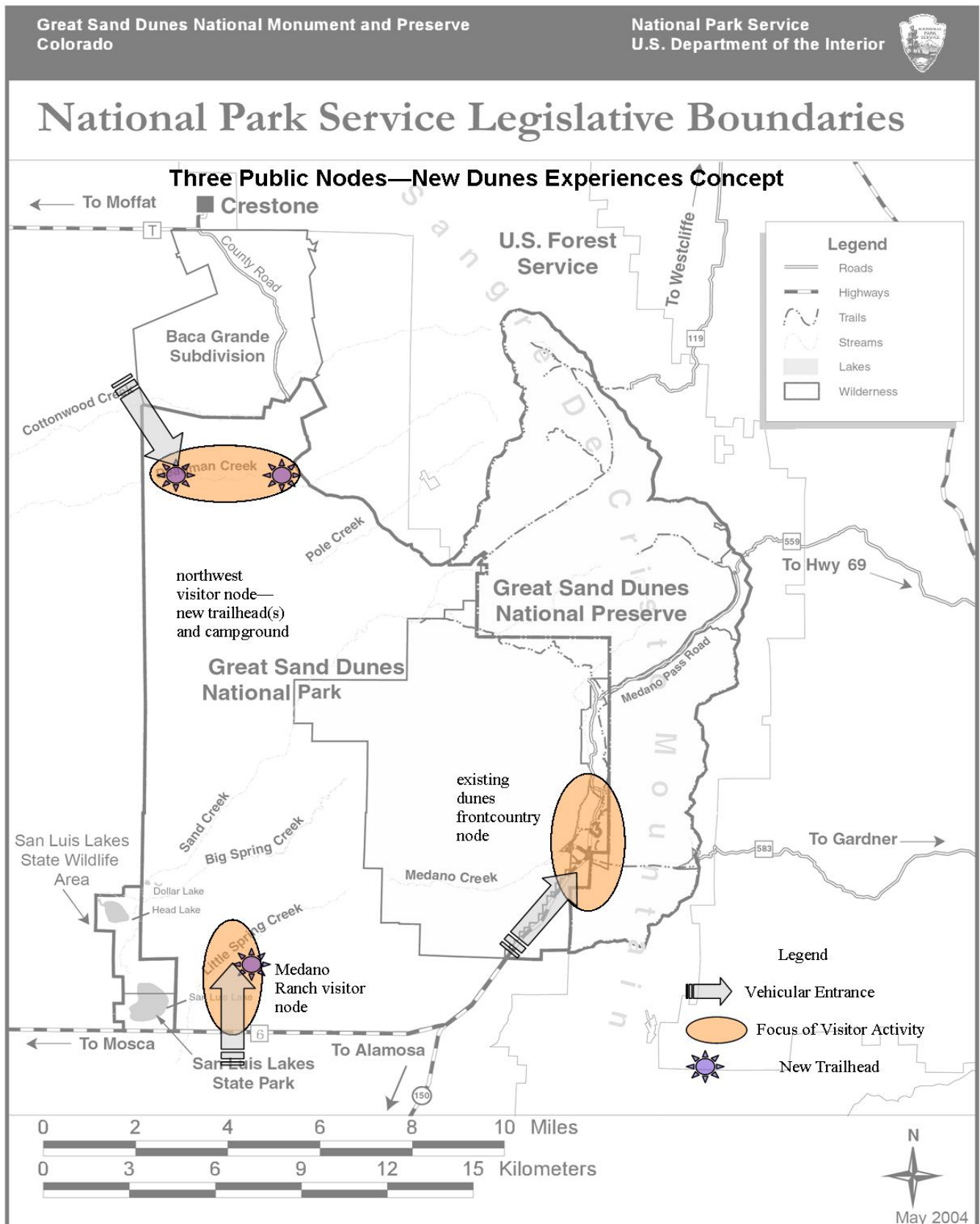
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### *Three Public Nodes—New Dunes Experiences Concept*

In this alternative, most visitors would gain access to the park and preserve through three areas or “nodes”: at the existing developed area east of the dunes (this area would remain essentially the same); at Medano Ranch (with adaptive use of historic structures); and in the northwest portion of the park expansion area (access via existing Baca Ranch roads to one or more backcountry trailheads, and perhaps a primitive campground). This alternative would provide fairly diverse options for visitors to experience different portions of the dunes system. Visitor facilities and trails would be concentrated in or near these nodes, and the rest of the park and preserve would remain largely undeveloped, allowing natural processes to occur.

The Medano Ranch headquarters would become a public day use area. Historic structures at the ranch would be adaptively used for public purposes (e.g., interpretive area or environmental education facility), and guided hiking and horseback tours to nearby high interest areas could be provided. A semi-wild bison herd would range on park expansion lands. Dogs would be allowed only in certain areas of the park. All-terrain vehicles would not be allowed within the national park or preserve. When the main dunes parking area is full, visitors would be directed to alternate park nodes. No new areas would be proposed for wilderness designation.

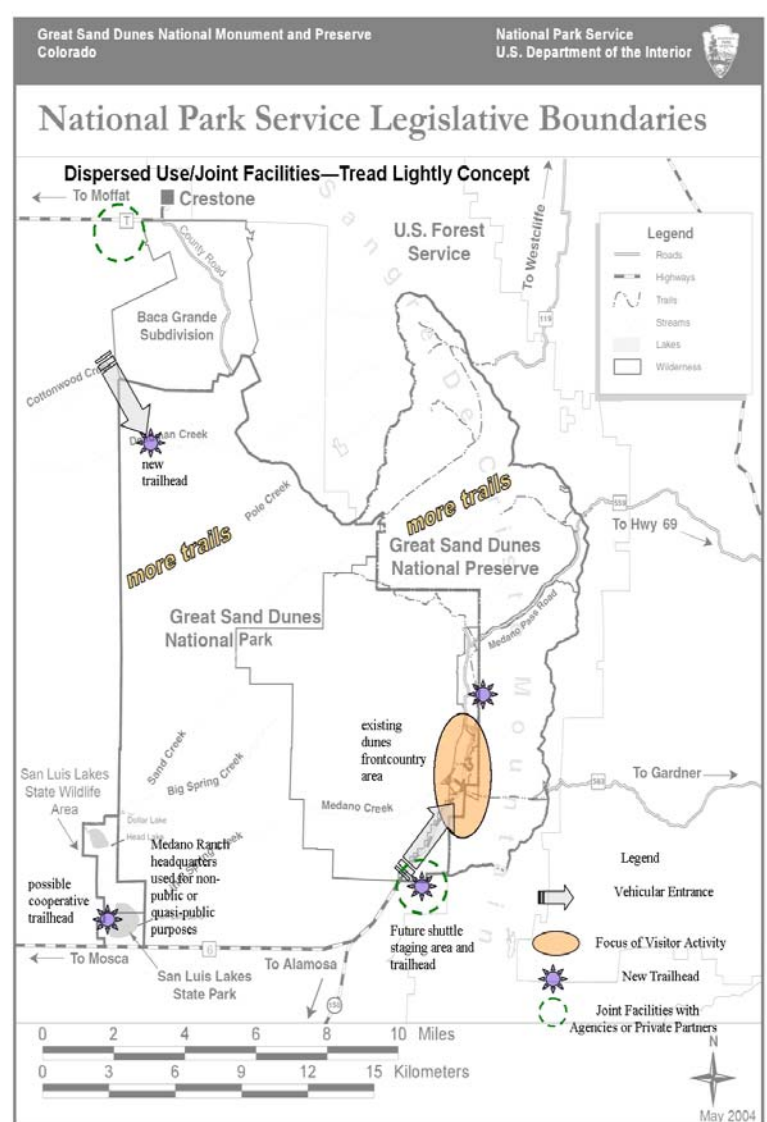




### ***Dispersed Use / Joint Facilities—Tread Lightly Concept***

In this alternative, new options would be created for dispersed hiking and horseback use in new areas of the park and preserve. Carefully located access routes around the perimeter would provide new visitor opportunities without constructing many facilities, keeping most new lands free for natural processes to continue. Visitor opportunities could include longer day use options or overnight linking or loop options. This alternative would emphasize cooperative or joint facilities (e.g., ranger or contact stations, access routes, and trailheads) with neighboring management agencies or private partners. It would also emphasize management practices that are similar to those on neighboring lands, as appropriate. A new trailhead would be provided in the northwest corner of the park. Several new trails would be provided in the park and in the preserve, and links to trails on adjacent lands would be a priority.

Medano Ranch facilities and historic structures would be adaptively used for non-public or quasi-public purposes (e.g., administrative use, bison management, or a research institute). A semi-wild bison herd would range on park expansion (and possibly refuge) lands. Dogs would generally be allowed within the park and preserve and must be leashed. All-terrain vehicles would be allowed on the Medano Pass Road within the national preserve only. The existing developed area east of the dunes (e.g., main park road, visitor center, dunes parking area, campground) would remain pretty much the same. A shuttle system to transport visitors into the dunes area at peak visitation times (when the existing parking lot is full) would be considered. This alternative would propose additional designated wilderness, but less than in the “dunefield focus” alternative.



### **Planning Steps Update Great Sand Dunes GMP and Wilderness Review**

<u>Step 1: Project Start-up</u>	Completed
<u>Step 2: “Discovery” (initial idea gathering)</u>	Completed
<u>Step 3: Foundation and Analysis</u>	Completed
<u>Step 4: Goals and Alternatives</u>	February 2004 - March 2005
<u>Step 5: Draft GMP / EIS</u>	April 2005 - March 2006
<u>Step 6: Final GMP / EIS</u>	April 2006 - July 2007

[Note: Dates shown are approximate.]

## *Second Great Sand Dunes System Interagency Meeting*

The National Park Service hosted a second interagency meeting related to the Great Sand Dunes general management plan on April 28, 2004. Individuals from the following agencies or areas attended the meeting: Colorado Division of Wildlife, Colorado Division of Water Resources, San Luis Lake State Park, U.S.D.A. Resource Conservation and Development, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management. The National Park Service planning team shared preliminary ideas about management alternatives for the park and preserve, and sought feedback from the agencies. Topics of discussion included access to public lands (trailheads, access for hunters, means of access, etc.); elk and bison management; all-terrain vehicles; and water rights.

## *Great Sand Dunes National Park Advisory Council Schedule*

Tentative Meetings	Probable Location	General Topic(s)
September 9, 2004 (1 day)	Crestone, CO	Evaluate elements of alternatives
January 2005 (3 days)	Alamosa, CO	Ongoing business
April 2005 (1 day)	Undecided	Procedure for selecting a preferred general management plan alternative



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