

April 2006

Issue 6

Great Sand Dunes

National Park and Preserve General Management Plan Newsletter

Dear Friends,

In our last general management plan (GMP) newsletter, which was published in January 2005, we presented several possible alternative ways of managing Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. Since that time, the planning team has conducted public and agency meetings to gather input about the alternatives, refined the alternatives, and studied the potential environmental consequences of the refined alternatives. In consultation with the Great Sand Dunes National Park Advisory Council, the planning team subsequently developed a National Park Service (NPS) preferred alternative. During the past several months, the planning team has been writing the *Draft General Management Plan / Wilderness Study / Environmental Impact Statement*, and revising it based on agency review comments. We hope to distribute the draft plan to the public in April 2006.

This newsletter provides the following updates and elements:

- a brief summary of the GMP/wilderness alternatives, including the NPS preferred alternative
- a brief summary of the impacts (consequences) of the alternatives
- an update on the planning steps and time line for the GMP project
- an update on the work of the Great Sand Dunes National Park Advisory Council
- planning updates from neighboring agencies
- a return postcard, so you can tell us if you want a copy of the draft plan
- locations and dates for public meetings on the draft plan

If you'd like to receive a copy of the *Draft General Management Plan / Wilderness Study / Environmental Impact Statement* for the Great Sand Dunes, please fill out and mail the enclosed postcard. The entire document will also be online for viewing or downloading, and it will be available at local libraries and other locations. We hope you'll attend one of the upcoming public meetings on the draft plan and/or send comments when you have reviewed the plan. Participation by the public has been crucial to the planning process so far, and we look forward to your continued input.

Sincerely,



Steve W Chaney

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

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Highlights of the Draft General Management Plan Alternatives

No-Action Alternative

The **no-action alternative** was developed to provide a baseline for evaluating the changes and impacts of the three action alternatives. This baseline is characterized primarily by conditions in December 2004, roughly two months after ownership and management of the Baca Ranch was transferred to the U.S. government, and continuation of current management practices into the future. Most visitor use would continue to be focused in or near the eastern part of the dunefield. The developed area east of the dunes (main park road, visitor center, and campground) would remain essentially the same. Some visitors would continue to explore backcountry areas of the park and preserve via designated trails and roads, and cross-country horse and hiking use would also continue. Some people would enter the north part of the park on foot from the Baca Grande subdivision.

No new areas would be recommended for wilderness. New park lands that were not open to public use before December 2004 would be managed in a very conservative manner. That is, there would be no new development, and visitor use would be managed so as to not establish new practices for camping, types and routes of access, etc.

New park areas would be inventoried for natural and cultural resources and managed according to NPS policies that emphasize natural processes (for example, nonnative species, interior pasture fences, and artificial water holes and sources would be removed). Existing trails and trailheads in the park and preserve would be maintained, but there would be no new trails or trailheads. The Nature Conservancy would continue to manage Medano Ranch, including the Medano Ranch headquarters. There would be no public use of Medano Ranch. Bison grazing would continue within the park on lands leased or owned by The Nature Conservancy. Leashed dogs would generally be allowed within the park and preserve.

NPS Preferred Alternative

The **NPS preferred alternative** was developed with substantial public, interagency, and NPS staff participation between 2003 and 2005. This is the plan the National Park Service proposes to implement over the next 15 to 20 years. Options would be created for dispersed hiking and horseback riding; a few new trails would be provided. Cooperative or joint facilities (such as access routes, trailheads, and ranger stations) with neighboring management agencies or private partners would be emphasized.

A large portion of the park expansion lands would be recommended for future designation as wilderness. A shuttle system would be considered to transport visitors to the main dunes area at peak visitation times. The park's fee booth would be removed and a new one would be located closer to the park boundary. Bike lanes would be added to the main entrance road from the park boundary to the dunes parking lot. A biking/walking path would connect the Pinyon Flats campground to the dunes parking lot and visitor center.

The National Park Service would seek to acquire Medano Ranch and adaptively use the ranch headquarters for administrative purposes (offices, housing, storage, research support), and scheduled, guided public activities (interpretive programs, environmental education, a base for guided hiking or horseback tours, special events). Most historic Medano Ranch structures would be maintained. Leashed dogs would be allowed within the national park within the frontcountry and dunes play zones only, and they would be allowed within the national preserve.

A trailhead would be provided in the north part of the park to provide a closer access point for backcountry recreation on the nearby national forest, the preserve, and new lands within the national park. Assuming

neighboring entities find a way to provide vehicle access, the trailhead would be accessed via the Baca National Wildlife Refuge or Baca Grande subdivision, and then via Cow Camp Road within the national park. Also, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), in consultation with the National Park Service, may study the need for (and impacts of) providing public vehicle access to USFS lands via Liberty Road or via an extension of Cow Camp Road; these options would be studied in a separate USFS/NPS environmental analysis study.

Dunefield Focus-Maximize Wildness Alternative

In the **dunefield focus—maximize wildness 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. Backcountry areas would be primitive and rugged, providing outstanding opportunities for solitude and adventure. A large portion of the park expansion lands would be recommended for future designation as wilderness.

Existing trails and trailheads would be maintained. Most visitors would continue to visit the main dunefield area (main park road, visitor center, dunes parking lot, and picnic area). Parking and related support facilities, such as restrooms, could be expanded in the frontcountry zone if dunes parking lots filled too often. A new multiuse trail for bicyclists and pedestrians would extend from near the park's main entrance to the visitor center, dunes parking lot / picnic area, and to the Pinyon Flats campground. A gate for horse access would be provided on the north boundary of the national park, and pedestrian access from the Baca Grande subdivision would continue.

The National Park Service would seek acquisition of the Medano Ranch and would manage it as a natural/wild area. Ranch structures would not be maintained (or would be removed

after documentation). Leashed dogs would be restricted to parking areas, picnic areas, and car campgrounds within the national park—they would not be permitted in the national preserve (except hunting dogs).

Three Public Nodes Alternative

In the **three public nodes alternative**, most visitors would gain access to the park and preserve via three areas or “nodes.” Visitor facilities and trails would be concentrated in or near the three nodes, and the rest of the park and preserve would remain largely undeveloped. This alternative would provide fairly diverse options for visitors to experience different portions of the dunes system.

The first node, located at the existing developed area east of the dunes, would remain essentially the same. The second node would be located at the Medano Ranch headquarters. The National Park Service would seek acquisition of Medano Ranch and would manage the ranch headquarters as a public day-use area, most historic ranch structures would be maintained, and guided hiking and horseback tours to nearby high interest areas could be provided. The third node, located in the north part of the park, would include a backcountry trailhead and a primitive campground if an appropriate public vehicle access route could be identified via the Baca National Wildlife Refuge or Baca Grande subdivision.

Dogs would not be permitted in areas where there is increased potential for or a history of conflicts with visitors or with wildlife; otherwise, leashed dogs would be allowed. No new wilderness would be recommended in this alternative. The USFS, in consultation with the National Park Service, may study the need for (and impacts of) providing public vehicle access to USFS lands via Liberty Road or via an extension of Cow Camp Road to the mountain front; these options would be studied in a separate USFS/NPS environmental analysis study.



Kangaroo Rat

Brief Summary of Impacts of the Draft GMP Alternatives

The space available in this newsletter permits only the briefest summary of impacts. Impacts will be discussed in detail in the *Draft General Management Plan Wilderness Study / Environmental Impact Statement*.

For all alternatives, most impacts on natural resources (vegetation, wildlife, wetlands, etc.) and cultural resources (e.g., archeological sites) would result from visitor use in new park areas and growth in visitor use over the life of the plan. The action alternatives would also have direct and indirect natural resource impacts from limited new facilities such as trails, trailheads, and (in one alternative) a primitive campground. Some facilities would affect scenery and traffic in and around the park. In the NPS preferred and three public nodes alternatives, National Park Service adaptive use

of the Medano Ranch headquarters would help protect historic structures, and the guided learning zone would allow visitors to learn about and enjoy sensitive resources while protecting those resources. Under the three action alternatives, the managed bison herd and hay meadow irrigation would be eliminated and more natural conditions restored. Wilderness recommendations in the NPS preferred and dunefield focus-maximize wilderness alternatives would affect park resources, visitor experiences, and operations of the National Park Service and other agencies. Providing a trailhead in the north portion of the national park (NPS preferred and three public nodes alternatives) would improve access to new NPS and USFS lands and have other beneficial and adverse impacts on neighboring communities and agencies.



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>	Completed
<u>Step 5: Draft GMP / EIS</u>	April 2005 - April 2006
<u>Step 6: Final GMP / EIS</u>	April 2006 - July 2007

[Note: Dates shown are approximate.]



Great Sand Dunes National Park Advisory Council Update

The Great Sand Dunes National Park Advisory Council met in July 2005 to review and discuss the NPS preferred GMP alternative. The council endorsed this alternative at the meeting. In November, some council members participated in an NPS-sponsored tour of the area around the north portion of the national park, including the Baca National Wildlife Refuge headquarters area, Cow Camp Road from County Road T to Deadman Creek, and the two Saguache County roads in the Baca Grande subdivision that end at the park boundary. Staff from the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service were along on the tour to talk about wildlife, geology, hydrology, flora, and agency management issues in the national park/preserve and refuge.

The advisory council met most recently in late February. The purpose of this meeting was to review progress on the GMP and to develop a public participation strategy that will encourage as many

people as possible to learn about and comment on the *Draft General Management Plan / Wilderness Study / Environmental Impact Statement* for Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. Plans are in place for the council to meet again in July 2006 to review public comments on the draft plan and to make recommendations to the National Park Service.

Current members of the Great Sand Dunes National Park Advisory Council:

- Herry Andrews
- Christine Canaly
- Hobart Dixon
- Robert Ogburn
- Robert Philleo
- Paul Robertson
- Terry Sandmeier
- Mike Spearman
- George Whitten Jr.
- Jeff Woodard

Related News From Other Agencies

U.S. Forest Service

The Rio Grande National Forest will begin preliminary public scoping this spring for a forest plan amendment. This amendment will establish the guiding management direction for the portions of the Baca Ranch that became National Forest.



Schedule of Public Meetings

Please attend one of the upcoming public meetings to visit with the planning team for the Great Sand Dunes General Management Plan / Wilderness Study, and to learn more about the draft plan.

Date	Time	General Location	Details
Monday May 15	7:00 - 9:00 p.m.	Crestone, CO	Colorado College – Conference Center From Hwy 17 near Moffat, turn east on to County Road T. After about 11 miles, you will see a sign on the right (south side) of the road for the center. Phone: 719.256.4495
Tuesday May 16	7:00 - 9:00 p.m.	Alamosa, CO	Family Recreation Center 2222 Old Sanford Road Phone: 719.589.2106
Wednesday May 17	7:00 - 9:00 p.m.	Westcliffe, CO	All Aboard Westcliffe 110 Rosita Avenue Phone: 719.783.2865
Friday May 19	6:00 - 8:00 p.m.	Denver, CO	REI Flagship Store – Event Meeting Room 1416 Platte Street Phone: 303.756.3100

Information About the Enclosed Postcard

Please use the enclosed postcard to tell us if you want a copy of the *Draft General Management Plan / Wilderness Study / Environmental Impact Statement* for the dunes, and if so, which format you prefer. The printed version is more than an inch thick; it's more cost effective and conserves paper if we produce and mail it on a compact disc (CD) in pdf format, which is easily accessible using Adobe Acrobat Reader. The entire document will be posted on the Web site (see below) in April and available at local repositories. If you do not return the postcard we will assume you do not want a copy of the plan. Please note that the postcard requires a postage stamp.

Where the draft GMP/WS/EIS will be Available:

- Carnegie Public Library, 120 Jefferson, Monte Vista, Colorado
- Crestone/Baca Library, Crestone, Colorado
- Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve Visitor Center
- Saguache County Library, 702 Pitkin Avenue, Saguache, Colorado
- Southern Peaks Public Library, 423 - 4th Street, Alamosa, Colorado
- West Custer County Library, 209 Main Street, Westcliffe, Colorado

How to Get Maps of the GMP Alternatives:

Color maps are available now at the National Park Service Planning Web site:

<http://planning.den.nps.gov/plans.cfm>

- select Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve
- Go to the heading "What's New"
- Browse under the "Planning Documents" heading for each map

The General Management Plan / Wilderness Study / EIS will be posted at the same site when it is published in April.





Maps and more information can be
found on the Web at:

<http://planning.nps.gov/plans.cfm>



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