

January 2005

Issue 5

Great Sand Dunes

National Park and Preserve General Management Plan Newsletter

Dear Friends, Neighbors, and Associates,

The National Park Service (NPS) is continuing to refine general management plan (GMP) alternatives for Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. The alternatives are being refined with help from the Great Sand Dunes National Park Advisory Council, input from the public, and through consultations with other government agencies and American Indian tribes. Revised GMP alternatives are described in this newsletter. We will hold public meetings in late January and early February to discuss the alternatives and gather further input from you; see p. 8 for meeting dates, times, and locations.

We would like to draw your attention to some of the more notable changes from earlier versions of the GMP alternatives:

- 1) reintroduction and federal management of a native wild bison herd is no longer considered feasible within the life of the GMP and is not included in any GMP alternative; see p. 6 for more information.
- 2) public access across the Baca National Wildlife Refuge to NPS lands will not be considered until the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service begins its comprehensive planning process for the refuge in 2008 or later. Thus, the two GMP alternatives that include trailhead parking within the north end of the national park (for carefully managed backcountry access) now include the possibility of access via two routes: via the refuge (at some point in the future), or via the Baca Grande subdivision. In the latter possibility, the trailhead would be reached via existing public roads within the subdivision that connect to improved all-weather roads within the park. This option could help alleviate potential parking issues within the subdivision, and might prove to be a temporary measure (if vehicle access via the refuge is developed in the future).
- 3) off-highway vehicle use on the Medano Pass Primitive Road (within the national preserve only) is no longer included in any GMP alternative; see p. 6 for more information.

Please attend the upcoming public meetings, visit the Great Sand Dunes GMP website, and/or mail comments on the revised alternatives to us by February 18, 2005. We will continue to consider your ideas and opinions as we develop the general management plan for Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve.

Thank you for your continued interest in the future of the Great Sand Dunes.

Sincerely,



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

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

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No Action Alternative

The no- action alternative represents the continuation of existing management. It is used as a baseline for comparison with the action alternatives.

In the no action alternative, visitor use patterns would not change significantly from current patterns. Most visitor use would continue to be focused in or near the eastern edge of the dunefield. Some visitors would explore backcountry areas of the park and preserve via established trails and roads, and cross- country horse and hiking use would also continue. The existing developed area east of the dunes (main park road, visitor center, and campground) would remain essentially the same. However, the dunes parking lot would undergo minor expansion (~5% additional paved surface) and reconfiguration to improve circulation and increase capacity. New park lands that were not open to public use before the end of 2004 would be managed in a very conservative manner to protect resources and to preserve options for implementation of various general management plan alternatives. In particular, visitor use (e.g., camping, types and routes of access, and campfires) would be managed so as not to establish practices that could conflict with the final general management plan. New park areas would be inventoried for natural and cultural resources and managed according to NPS policies that emphasize natural processes (for example, exotic species, interior pasture fences, and artificial water holes and sources would be removed). No new areas would be proposed for wilderness designation.

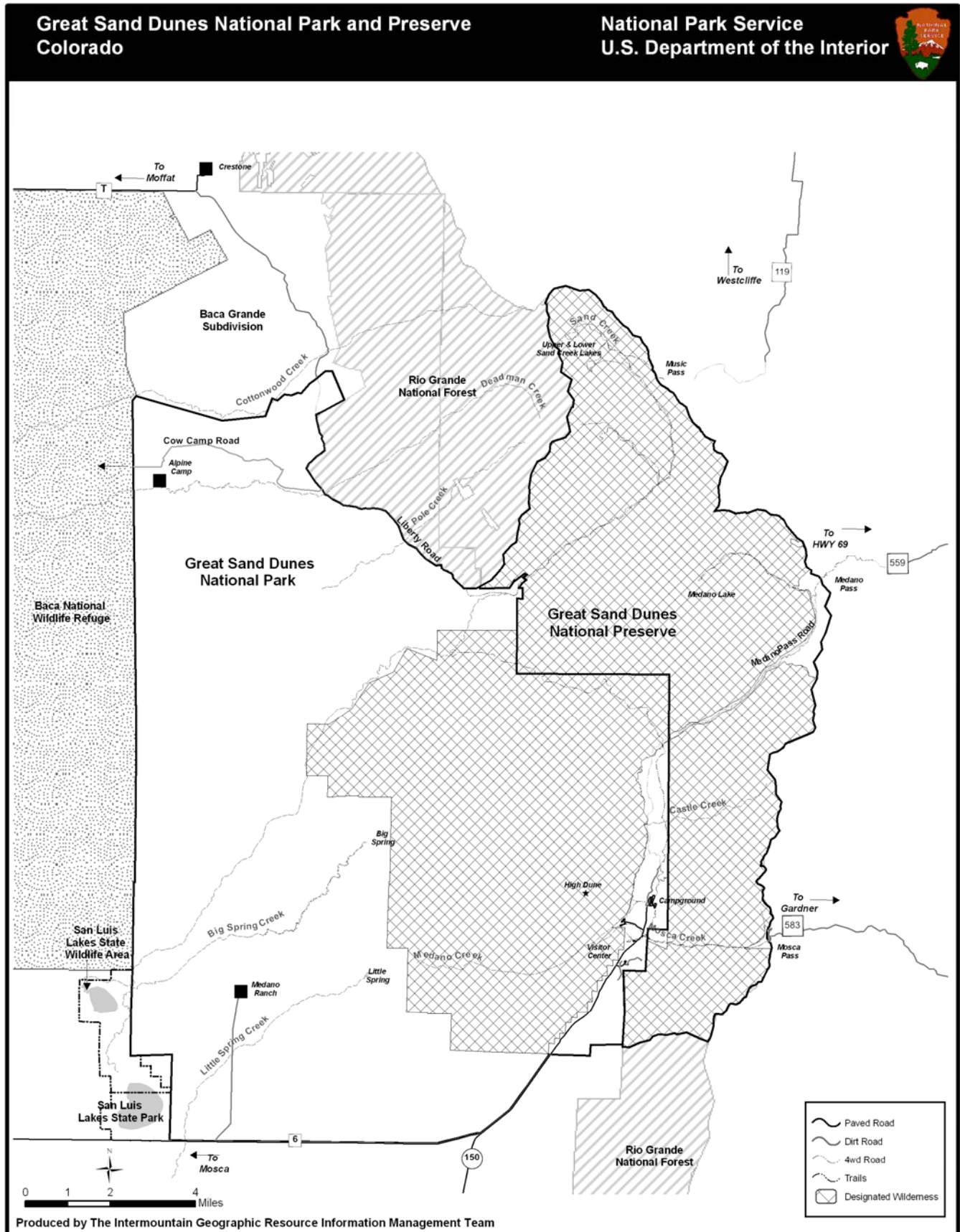
Historic structures within new park lands (i.e., those added by the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve Act of 2000), including Medano Ranch structures, would be evaluated for their historic significance, but not actively maintained. The Sand Creek Stamp Mill complex would be evaluated for its

historic significance and decisions regarding management would be made based on that evaluation. Other unused structures (Wellington Cabin, Shockey's Cabin, Three Cabins, and a cabin on Mosca Pass) would be documented but not actively maintained. If the structures became a health or safety hazard, they would be individually assessed to determine whether they should be removed. Existing trails and trailheads in the park and preserve would be maintained and the Sand Creek and Sand Ramp trails would be connected; otherwise there would be no new trails or trailheads. Visitors would be able to enjoy most portions of the park via foot or horseback (select areas would be off-limits to horses).

Bison grazing would continue within the park on lands owned or leased by The Nature Conservancy. Leashed dogs would generally be allowed within the park and preserve. Dogs would also be allowed for hunting, which is permitted only within the national preserve. Off- highway vehicles would not be allowed within the national park or preserve. There would be no limit on the numbers of visitors entering the park, preserve, or any particular area, but existing group size limits, backcountry permit requirements, packstock regulations, etc. would remain. After non- NPS use of Cow Camp Road ends, the road would not be maintained. Legislation would be sought to resolve a boundary discrepancy involving the park and the San Luis Lakes State Wildlife Area. The NPS would attempt to acquire the transbasin water rights to the Hudson and Medano ditches if the owner is willing to sell.



Great sand Dunes



Dunefield Focus—Maximize Wildness Alternative

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 documented but not actively maintained. If the structures became a health or safety hazard, they would be individually assessed to decide whether they should be 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. Facilities could be expanded within the frontcountry if facility capacity is reached (i.e., the parking lot fills too often). Most visitors would

continue to visit the main dunefield area (main park road, visitor center, dunes parking lot, and picnic area). A new bike trail would extend from the park boundary, near the Oasis, to the visitor center, dunes parking lot/picnic area, and to the Pinon Flats campground. Alpine Camp would serve as a backcountry patrol cabin for NPS administrative purposes; there would be a couple of options for administrative access to Alpine Camp.

Domestic grazing within the park, including bison grazing, would be phased out if and when The Nature Conservancy decides to discontinue agricultural operations on its private, state, and federal leased lands. At that time the bison fence would no longer be needed and would be removed. Leashed dogs would be permitted only in parking areas, picnic areas, and car campgrounds. Dogs would still be allowed for hunting, which is permitted only within the national preserve. Off-highway vehicles would not be allowed within the national park or preserve. A route or routes would be designated (via the Superintendent's Compendium) for hunter ingress/egress to the national preserve and U.S. Forest Service lands.



Maps and more information on the web:

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

or see page 7 of this newsletter

Three Public Nodes—New Dunes Experiences Alternative

In this alternative, most visitors would gain access to the park and preserve through three areas or “nodes”. 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 third node, located in the northwest portion of the park expansion area, would include a backcountry trailhead and a primitive campground within the backcountry access zone. The trailhead at the third node would have a capacity of about 15- 20 vehicles and would accommodate horse use. The primitive campground at the third node would be small (ten or fewer campsites). 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, allowing natural processes to occur. Alpine Camp could serve visitor purposes, such as a ranger station or backcountry permit station. This alternative would provide fairly diverse options for visitors to experience different portions of the dunes system. No new areas would be proposed for wilderness designation.

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, contact station, concessions support, picnicking, and/or environmental education facility); guided hiking and horseback tours to nearby high interest areas could be provided. When the main dunes

parking area is full, visitors would be directed to alternate park nodes. Within the guided learning zone, some existing unpaved roads would be used for administrative purposes, while others would be closed and administrative use discontinued.

Domestic grazing within the park, including bison grazing, would be phased out if and when The Nature Conservancy decides to discontinue agricultural operations on its private, state, and federal leased lands. At that time the bison fence would no longer be needed and would be removed. Dogs would not be permitted in areas where there is high potential for, or a history of

problems with, conflicts with visitors (e.g. the area of concentrated visitor use at Medano Creek near the dunes parking area) or with wildlife, (e.g., bighorn sheep). Within the dunes play zone, there would be an alternative downstream area where leashed dogs would be allowed. Dogs would still be allowed for hunting, which is permitted only within the national preserve. Off-highway vehicles would not be allowed within the national park or preserve. A route or routes would be designated (via the Superintendent's Compendium) for hunter ingress/egress to the national preserve and U.S. Forest Service lands.

Maps and more information on the web:
<http://planning.nps.gov/plans.cfm>
or see page 7 of this newsletter



Dispersed Use—Joint Facilities Alternative

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 with neighboring management agencies or private partners, such as access routes, trailheads, and ranger or contact stations (near public access points to new park lands). It would also emphasize management practices that are similar to those on neighboring lands, as appropriate. Several new trails would be provided in the park and in the preserve, and links to trails on adjacent lands would be a priority. A small trailhead (about 10 – 15 vehicles) would be provided in the northwest corner of the park within the backcountry access zone. This trailhead would accommodate horse use or a partner would be sought to provide a horse trailhead facility outside the park. No campground would be provided in this area. Alpine Camp would serve as a backcountry patrol cabin for administrative use. This alternative would propose additional designated wilderness, but less than in the “dunefield focus” alternative.

Medano Ranch facilities and historic structures would be adaptively used for non-public or quasi-public

purposes, such as administrative use, an environmental education center, and/or a research institute. The area northwest of Sand Creek would be zoned backcountry adventure to allow for possible new trails: to Dollar Lake and wetlands/playas; for elk and bird watching; and/or for exploring the Sand Creek corridor. The existing developed area east of the dunes (main park road, visitor center, dunes parking area, and campground) would remain essentially the same. The park entrance station would be relocated closer to the park boundary, near the Oasis. A shuttle system to transport visitors into the dunes area at peak visitation times (when the dunes parking lot is full) would be considered.

Domestic grazing within the park, including bison grazing, would be phased out if and when The Nature Conservancy decides to discontinue agricultural operations on its private, state, and federal leased lands. At that time the bison fence would no longer be needed and would be removed. Leashed dogs would generally be allowed within the park and preserve. Dogs would also be allowed for hunting, which is permitted only within the national preserve. Off-highway vehicles would not be allowed within the national park or preserve. A route or routes would be designated (via the Superintendent's Compendium) for hunter ingress/egress to the national preserve and U.S. Forest Service lands.

Actions Considered but Dismissed

Allowing off- highway vehicles on Medano Pass Road (within the national preserve only). This action was originally considered because: 1) the U.S. Forest Service currently allows off- highway vehicle use on the Medano Pass Road *east* of the pass, and 2) off- highway vehicle use on the Medano Pass Road *west* of the pass was formerly allowed, before the area became a national preserve. This action was dropped from detailed consideration for the following reasons: off- highway vehicle users coming from the pass must turn around at the national park/preserve boundary anyway (off- highway vehicles are not allowed in national parks), many other areas outside the national preserve are available for off- highway vehicle use, there are concerns about resource damage resulting from illegal use on NPS lands outside the road corridor, and allowing off- highway vehicle use on NPS lands would require a special regulation (exception).

Reintroduction of a native, wild bison herd within the park and adjacent lands under federal management. This action was considered because bison are native to the San Luis Valley, and because NPS policy supports the reintroduction of native species if: 1) adequate habitat exists to support the species, 2) the species may be managed so as to not pose a serious threat to the public, 3) the species' genetic make- up closely matches that of the original, and 4) the species disappeared as a

direct result of human- induced change. Also, such restorations are supported only when they can be done in a way that promotes the restoration of natural resources and processes. Bison historically occurred intermittently in the San Luis Valley. Available bison habitat within the park is very limited compared to that needed by a wild (unconfined) bison herd on a year- round and year- to- year basis. Also, the abundance of bison forage is quite variable in this area due to limited precipitation and high elevation. Bison confined to the national park and adjacent Nature Conservancy lands (bison are not an option on the refuge for the foreseeable future), would have to be intensively managed to maintain herd size and mimic natural grazing impacts. Such management would require a significant amount of time and energy that would divert resources from other park needs and projects. For these and other reasons, this option is not realistic for the life of the GMP. If additional bison habitat becomes available at some point in the future, this option may be reconsidered by the NPS. In the meantime, the NPS may allow The Nature Conservancy to continue its bison ranching operations within the park (on its private inholdings and on lands it leases from the state and NPS), thus preserving some desirable aspects of bison on the land, creating opportunities for natural systems study, and providing chances for visitors to see bison .



Planning Steps Update Great Sand Dunes GMP and Wilderness Review

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

[Note: Dates shown are approximate.]

Great Sand Dunes National Park Advisory Council Schedule

Tentative Meetings	Probable Location	General Topic(s)
March 3, 2005 8:30 a.m.—4:30 p.m.	Mosca, CO (NPS Visitor Center)	Identify Impacts
April 28, 2005 8:30 a.m.—4:30 p.m.	Crestone, CO	Discuss factors to be considered when NPS selects a preferred alternative
July/August 2005	Undecided	Review NPS preferred alternative

How to Get Maps and More Information

One of the tools used 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. The last newsletter provided descriptions of several draft management zones. The planning team has applied these zones to the various alternatives, and will present these maps for discussion at the public meetings. You can also view and print these color maps (.pdf file format) and descriptions of the zones 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 alternative map and management zones

If you do not have web access or have trouble viewing the files, please call the staff at Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve at (719) 378- 6399 to obtain copies.

Schedule of Public Meetings

Please come to one of the public meetings to hear more about the alternatives and meet with the planning team for the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve general management plan.

Location	Date and Time
Alamosa, Colorado Alamosa County Complex 8900 Independence Way County Commissioner's Room	Monday, January 31, 2005 5:00 p.m.—7:00 p.m.
Crestone, Colorado Baca Grande Property Owner's Association Hall 68575 County Road T	Tuesday, February 1, 2005 5:00 p.m.—7:00 p.m.
Westcliffe, Colorado All Aboard Westcliffe 110 Rosita Ave.	Wednesday, February 2 5:00 p.m.—7:00 p.m.
Front Range Area (Golden, Colorado) Golden Community Center 1470 10th Street Bear Creek Room	Tuesday, February 8 5:00 p.m.—7:00 p.m.



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