

Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation
CALIFORNIA STATE PARKS

Heber Dunes SVRA General Plan

Working Paper #3: Planning Alternatives



HEBER DUNES SVRA GENERAL PLAN
WORKING PAPER #3

Prepared for:

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Heber Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area (SVRA) is an off-highway vehicle (OHV) park operated by the Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Division (OHMVR Division) of the California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR). The SVRA is located in Imperial County, near the border with Mexico (Figure 1). Heber Dunes encompasses roughly 343 acres of sand dunes within a region largely dominated by agriculture (Figures 2 and 3).

The OHMVR Division is undergoing a process to develop the first General Plan for Heber Dunes SVRA. The General Plan will serve as a guidebook for future development and enhancements to Heber Dunes. It will establish a long-term vision for the SVRA, identify potential recreation and facility improvements, and direct future SVRA management, resource stewardship, and public use.

Two additional working papers were previously developed as part of the General Plan process: *Major Themes Working Paper: Heber Dunes SVRA General Plan* (Major Themes Working Paper) (EDAW 2009a) and *Heber Dunes SVRA General Plan. Revised Working Paper #2: Existing Conditions, Issues, and Opportunities, Draft Park Unit, Vision, and Goals* (Working Paper #2) (EDAW 2009b). Previous working papers developed as part of the General Plan process can be accessed at http://ohv.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=26033.

This working paper provides a synopsis of the Planning Alternatives under study as part of General Plan preparation and is organized into the following three sections:

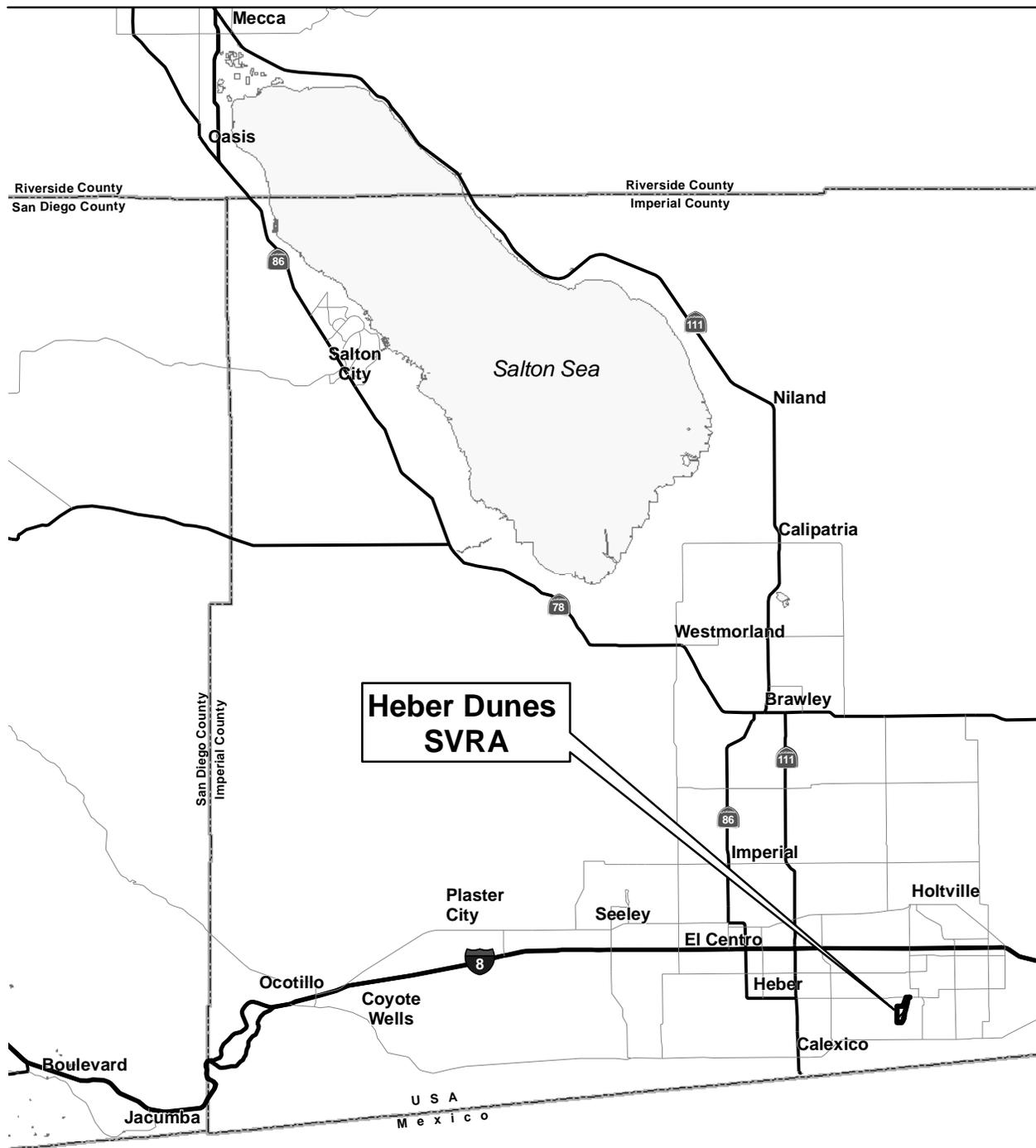
- **Introduction**—provides an overview of the General Plan project and presents the purpose of the Planning Alternatives;
- **Background**—describes the planning process, identifies key issues and opportunities, and presents the SVRA purpose, vision, and goals;
- **Planning Alternatives**—describes the use areas established for the General Plan process, presents the Planning Alternatives, and identifies elements common to both alternatives.

A public workshop to collect comments on the Planning Alternatives from community members and stakeholders will be held at Camarena Memorial Public Library in Calexico on October 14, 2009, from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. For more information, please contact Kirk Shea at (760) 767-1329 or at kshea@parks.ca.gov.

1.1 PURPOSE OF PLANNING ALTERNATIVES

Planning Alternatives typically explore different land use and site design layouts that can achieve the purpose, vision, and goals of a General Plan. Planning Alternatives have been developed to illustrate different scenarios for how Heber Dunes may evolve over the long-term. The Planning Alternatives are intended to facilitate discussion of possible future scenarios for Heber Dunes by DPR staff and the public. Prior to developing the General Plan, the Planning Alternatives will be analyzed by DPR staff and the public to identify which combination of options best serves the SVRA purpose and vision, DPR goals, and the public's

interest in the SVRA's future. Ultimately, a preferred alternative will be generated based on evaluation of the Planning Alternatives by DPR staff and the public. Preparation of the General Plan document will move forward once the preferred alternative has been established.



Source: California Department of Parks and Recreation 2007; ESRI 2003

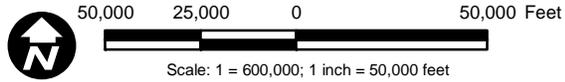
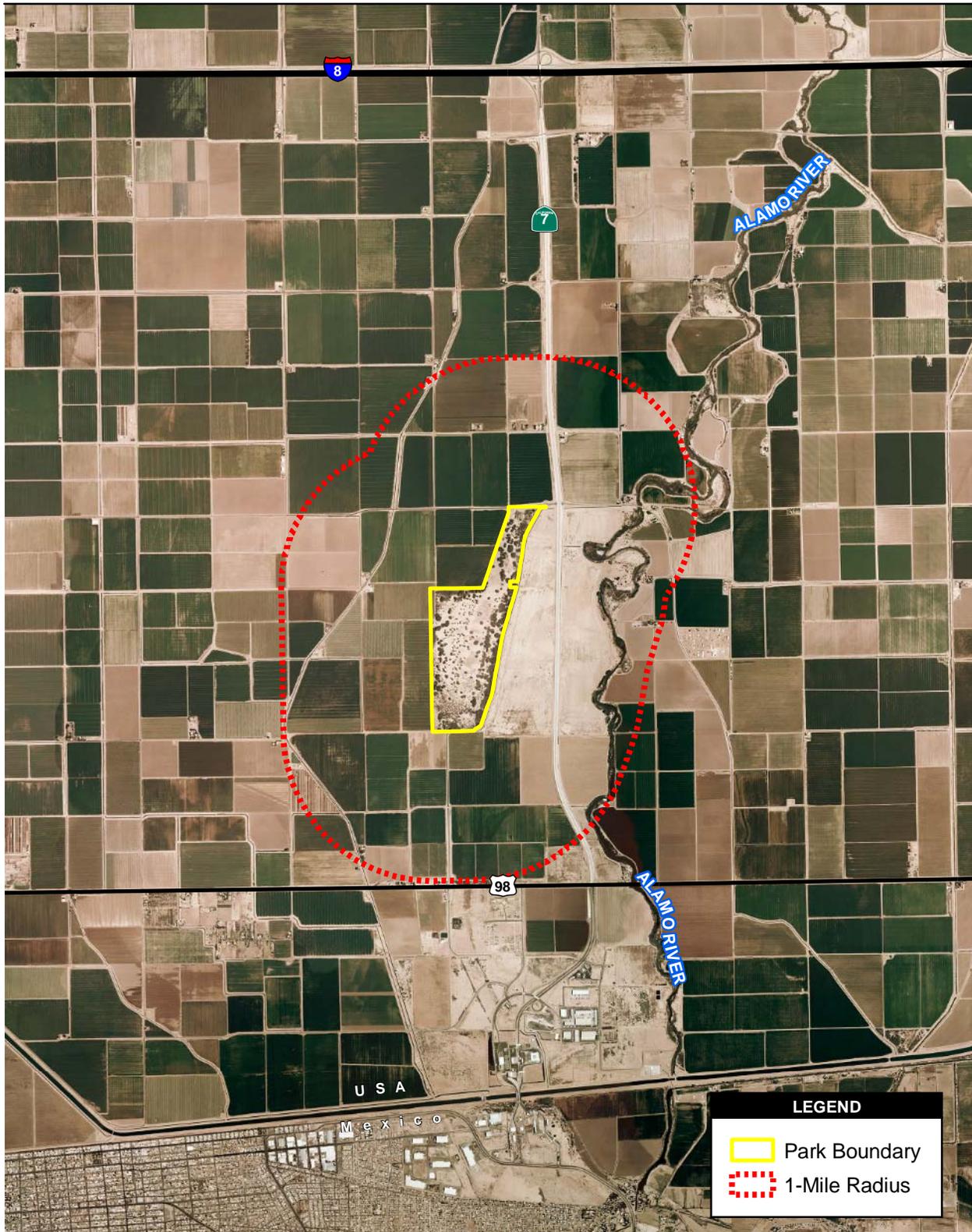


Figure 1
Regional Location Map

Heber Dunes SVRA General Plan, Working Paper #3

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Source: NAIP 2006

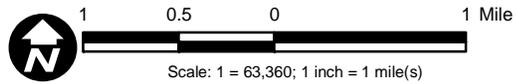
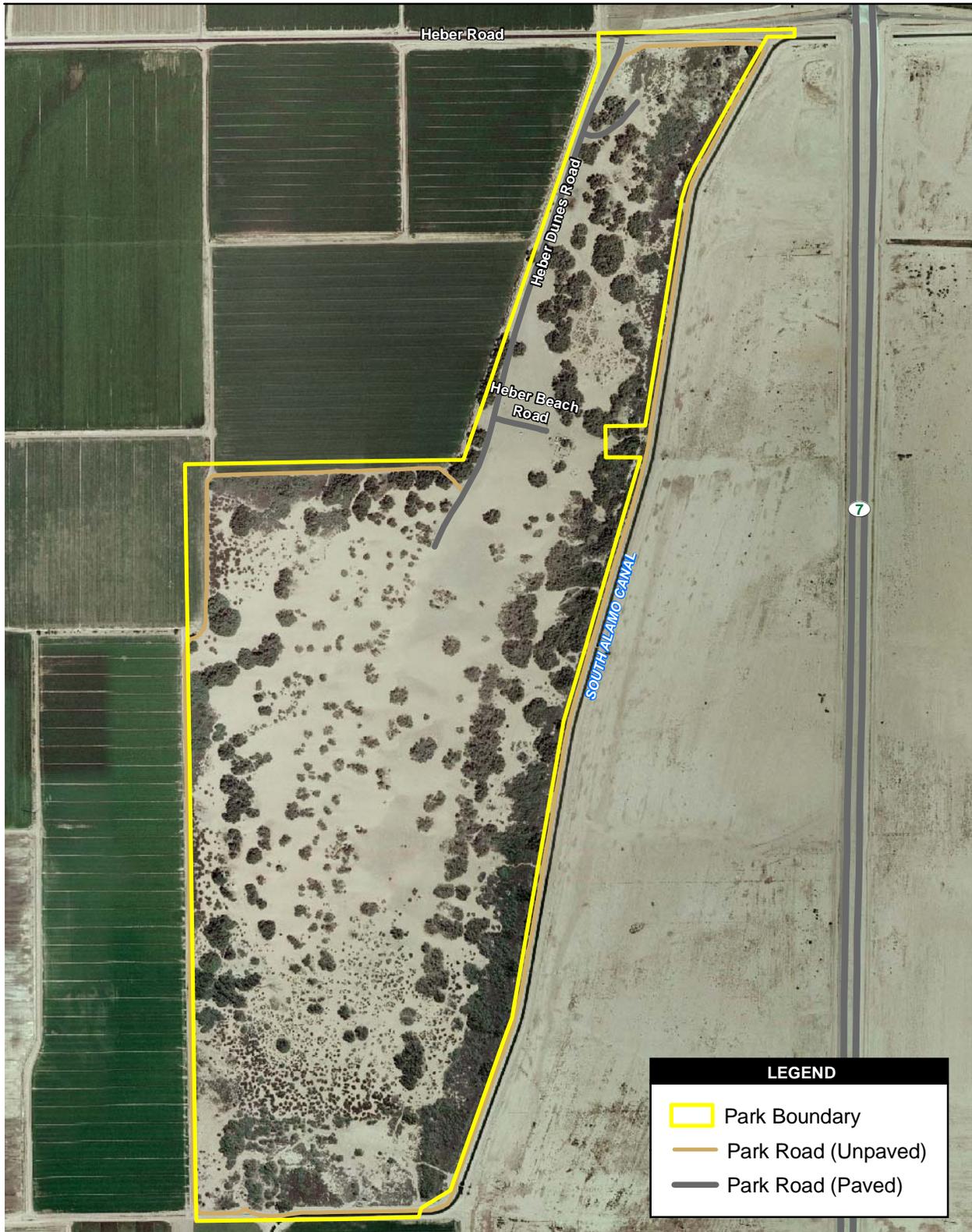


Figure 2
Local Context



Source: Aerials Express 2006

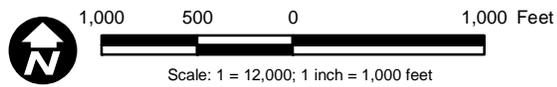


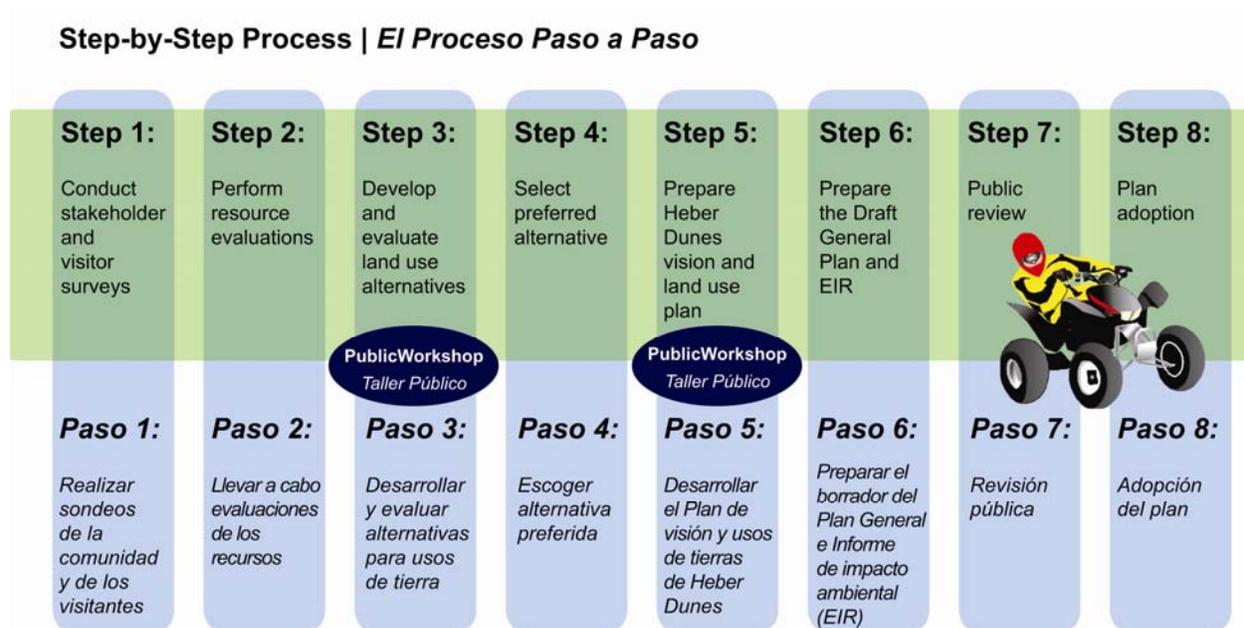
Figure 3
Aerial View of Heber Dunes SVRA

2.0 BACKGROUND

2.1 PLANNING PROCESS

General Plans are broad-based policy documents that establish long-range vision and goals and provide direction on future types of improvements, services, and programs. By legal mandate, all parks operated by DPR must have a General Plan. General Plans are intended to be used for 20 years or more. Therefore, the General Plan establishes a decision-making framework that is consistent with the established vision but also flexible to allow for changing conditions over time.

The steps of the General Plan process for Heber Dunes are depicted below. Initial public outreach tasks and evaluation of existing conditions occurred during Steps 1 and 2. The current focus is Step 3, “Develop and evaluate land use alternatives.” Following DPR review of this working paper, the Planning Alternatives will be revised to incorporate DPR feedback. Heber Dunes Public Workshop #1 will then be held in October to solicit input from the public on the Planning Alternatives. Following Public Workshop #1, the project team will identify a preferred alternative (Step 4) and then proceed with the remaining steps illustrated below.



2.1.1 DPR Involvement

DPR has been an active partner in the General Plan process through ongoing communications with EDAW AECOM (EDAW) staff, review and comment on EDAW General Plan interim work products, and staff participation in a June 2009 Project Team Workshop.

2.1.2 Public Input

Public input will play an essential role in the formulation of recommendations, programs, and priorities for the Heber Dunes SVRA General Plan. DPR has initiated a stakeholder-driven process whereby issues and ideas voiced by community members are guiding project research, alternatives analysis, and recommendations.

The public participation program includes the following:

- **On-site Visitor Survey**, using a person-to-person questionnaire. The surveys were conducted at Heber Dunes SVRA in February and March 2009.
- **Stakeholder Interviews**, conducted with a cross-section of stakeholders regarding potential ideas, concerns, and common goals associated with development of the Heber Dunes SVRA General Plan in March 2009.
- **Two Public Workshops**, to be held to gather public input during the formulation of the Heber Dunes SVRA General Plan. At the first workshop, scheduled for October 2009, OHMVR Division will present Planning Alternatives for the SVRA. During the second workshop, which is tentatively scheduled for early winter 2010, the Heber Dunes vision and land use plan will be presented.
- **Fact Sheets and Newsletters**, providing background information on the project, updates on project progress, and announcements of the public workshops.

Initial Community Outreach

The visitor survey and stakeholder interviews represent the first stage of the public participation process for the Heber Dunes SVRA General Plan project. Accordingly, the public participation program will involve several additional outreach efforts throughout the General Plan process.

The purpose of the visitor survey was to understand visitors' use patterns, concerns, and needs. Information on visitor demographics, visitor use patterns, identification of valued places and activities at Heber Dunes, opportunities for improvement, and safety concerns was collected. The purpose of the stakeholder interviews was to understand stakeholders' ideas, concerns, and common goals with respect to Heber Dunes SVRA. Meetings with a cross-section of stakeholders were conducted in March 2009. The interview participants—representing local planners, public agencies and utilities, public safety entities, OHV interests, social groups, civic organizations, environmental concerns, and Heber Dunes visitors and neighbors—shared their perspectives on long-range planning issues, ideas, concerns, and opportunities. The major themes identified through the initial community outreach efforts are presented in the Major Themes Working Paper (EDAW 2009a). These themes represent a synthesis of input captured from the visitor survey and stakeholder interviews on ideas, concerns, and common goals related to Heber Dunes SVRA.

2.2 KEY ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The results of existing conditions research and the major themes of initial community outreach informed the development of the issues and opportunities identified in Working Paper #2 (EDAW 2009b). While Working Paper #2 identified several issues and opportunities, the following section presents only the key issues and opportunities.

The SVRA provides unique recreational opportunities for local communities – The primary users of the SVRA are members of the local community and are predominantly of Hispanic or Latino origin. While state and federal parkland with OHV riding opportunities is abundant within Imperial County, these parks do not provide the novice riding opportunities or proximity to urban centers that make Heber Dunes SVRA unique. For these reasons, Heber Dunes functions as a highly valued regional park and recreation resource for residents of Imperial County.

Heber Dunes is a valued place for family gatherings – Most visits to Heber Dunes occur during weekends. These weekend visitors tend to be large groups of families and/or friends with children. Dedicated solo riders tend to use the SVRA during the week.

Most visitors that go to Heber Dunes in large groups stay in the SVRA for a good portion of the day, yet the total time spent riding OHVs is typically only a few hours. The primary additional recreational activities that Heber Dunes visitors take part in include gathering with family and friends, picnicking and barbequing, watching people ride OHVs, and viewing scenery. Many visitors and other stakeholders stated that there is a need for additional passive recreational opportunities at Heber Dunes that are compatible with OHV use. Suggestions tied to these discussions included barbeque facilities, additional shaded areas, additional small and large group picnic areas, additional restrooms, additional drinking water fountains and spigots, established riding trails removed from picnic areas, and creation of a children's trail.

Improving safety for all SVRA visitors – Visitors and other stakeholders widely acknowledged that safety conditions at Heber Dunes are generally good. At the same time, they would like to see safety enhanced as part of the General Plan process. Of particular concern was improving safety for children at Heber Dunes SVRA.

Some safety concerns expressed during the visitor survey and stakeholder interviews centered on how to reduce the potential for OHV collisions, as well as collisions between OHVs and nonriders. The importance of rider education was also raised as a consideration. Comments were also made about opportunities to enhance safety through designation of use areas (for example, free ride area, children's trail, and group picnic areas) and the establishment of associated management approaches.

Potential air quality effects are a regional concern – Air quality is an issue of regional concern in Imperial County. Dust and engine emissions from OHV riding can contribute to poor air quality conditions. The majority of the SVRA riding area is composed of sand dunes or clay pan areas with loose sand covering. Due to the loose nature of the sandy soils, OHV use results in dust generation that includes fugitive PM₁₀ and PM_{2.5} from ground disturbance.

Heber Dunes contains interesting and unique biological resources – Although the majority of vegetation on-site is nonnative tamarisk trees of low habitat quality, unique biological resources exist within the SVRA that could be preserved, restored, and enhanced (Figure 4). Particularly, the creosote habitat in the southern part of the park is a unique native habitat type that, with the appropriate management efforts, could be enhanced and potentially preserved. This could include managing OHV use in creosote areas, managing tamarisk, and providing education and interpretation of biological resources.

2.3 SVRA PURPOSE, VISION, AND GOALS

The SVRA draft purpose, vision, and goals were presented to DPR staff during the June 2009 Project Team Workshop led by EDAW. The language was reviewed and revised by workshop attendees. The revised statements are presented below.

2.3.1 Purpose

The declaration of purpose describes the purpose of the SVRA and is the broadest statement of management goals designed to fulfill the vision of the SVRA. A declaration of purpose is required by California Public Resources Code, Section 5002.2(b), “setting forth specific long-range management objectives for the park consistent with the park’s classification....”

The purpose of Heber Dunes SVRA is to provide effectively managed, responsible OHV and related recreational opportunities with recognition of the significance of the SVRA to the local population. The unit’s relatively small size and unique outdoor recreational setting provide opportunities for OHV riding, family and social gathering, and interpretative programs.

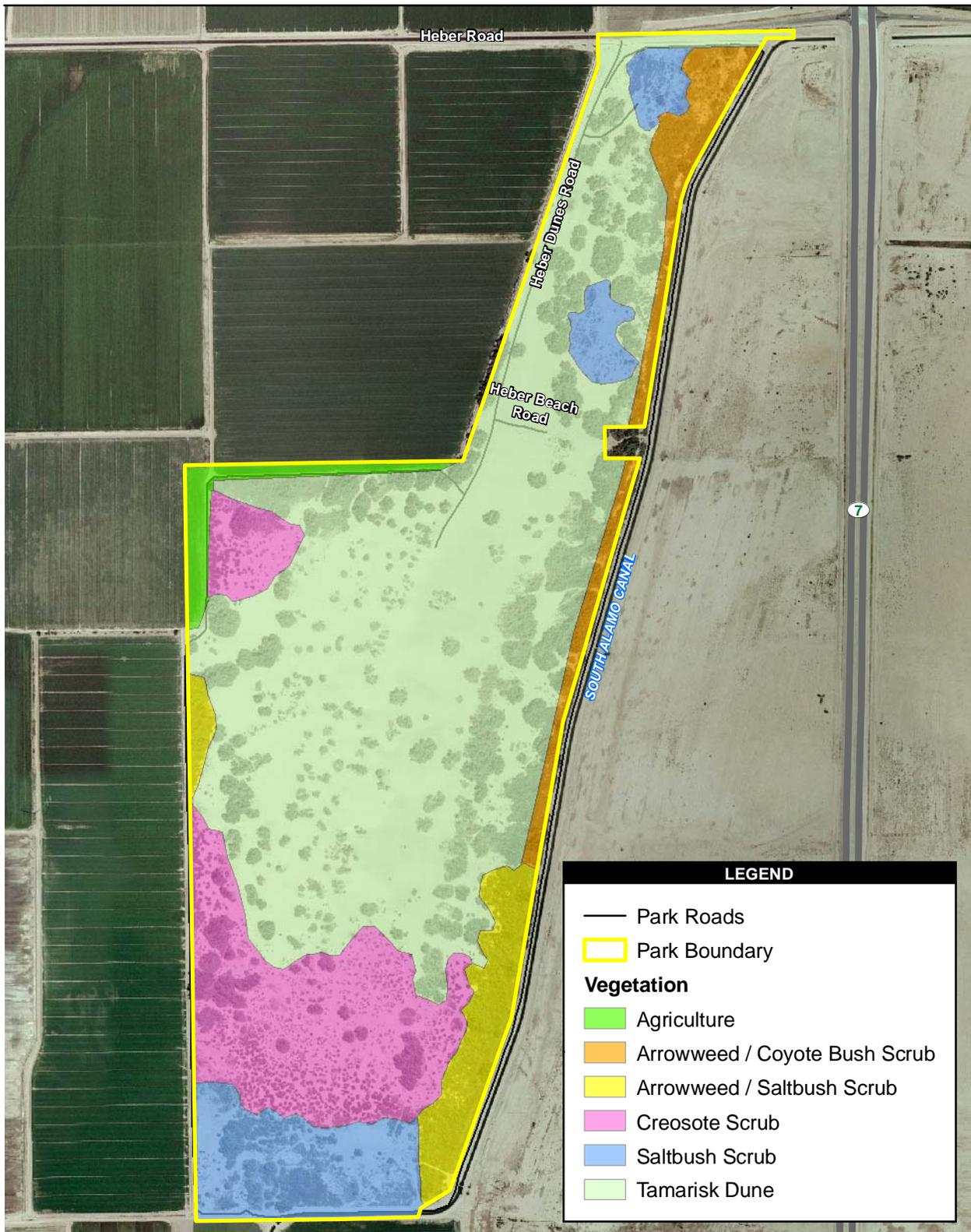
2.3.2 Vision

A unit vision describes the SVRA in future years, after DPR has achieved its general plan objectives and has satisfied visitor expectations.

Heber Dunes SVRA is envisioned to provide a safe and convenient place for friends, families, and groups to enjoy the outdoor recreational setting. On any given day, visitors will be able to take part in managed off-highway motor vehicle recreation and other activities, relax, and enjoy the unique setting. The SVRA’s community significance, as well as its natural history, will provide an opportunity for education and interpretation. Future expansion of Heber Dunes SVRA would provide a greater range of recreational and resource management opportunities.

2.3.3 Goals

The goals and guidelines of a General Plan address existing issues and provide ongoing guidance and management strategies that can be implemented to achieve the long-term vision for the park. The goals will establish the purpose of the SVRA and will provide the framework for the future establishment of guidelines, which will provide the direction that DPR will consider to achieve these goals. The Heber Dunes SVRA General Plan goals are presented in Table 1.



Source: Aerials Express 2006

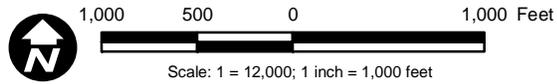


Figure 4
Vegetation and Plant Communities

Table 1 Heber Dunes SVRA General Plan Goals	
Natural and Physical Resources	
Manage the SVRA for protection of natural communities and the quality of the OHV recreational experience.	
Help protect local and regional air quality, particularly dust control.	
Visitor Use and Recreation	
Provide recreational opportunities for OHV riders of diverse ages and experience levels (including youth) and other SVRA visitors in a safe environment.	
Enhance individual-, family-, and community-centered recreational opportunities.	
Consider expanding recreational opportunities that are compatible with OHV use.	
Provide essential visitor and management facilities to enhance the visitor experience and SVRA operations.	
Establish a coordinated way-finding program that clarifies how to access and enjoy the SVRA.	
Interpretation and Education	
Develop education and interpretive materials that respond to the SVRA's sense of place and history and meet the needs of the diverse visitor population.	
Increase visitors' knowledge and appreciation of the history, natural resources, and recreational opportunities of the SVRA.	
Expand understanding of ecological relationships and heighten awareness and sensitivity to human impacts.	
Promote outreach efforts to develop partnerships for interpretive programming and education for responsible OHV riding.	
Park Use and Operations	
Maintain and enhance the quality of OHV recreational opportunities.	
Provide recreational opportunities compatible with OHV use.	
Consider expanding the SVRA to enhance recreation and resource management.	

3.0 PLANNING ALTERNATIVES

This section describes the approach to developing the Planning Alternatives, presents the use areas that have been established as part of the planning process, provides a description of each alternative, and identifies elements common to both alternatives.

3.1 PLANNING ALTERNATIVES APPROACH

The Planning Alternatives were developed based on analysis of existing conditions, input from visitors and other stakeholders, coordination with DPR staff, and guidance provided by the Heber Dunes SVRA purpose, vision, and goals. The two Planning Alternatives illustrate different land use and site design layouts. Both Planning Alternatives have been crafted to be consistent with the SVRA purpose, vision, and goals, while exploring different ways to achieve consistency. The preferred plan ultimately identified for the General Plan process may be one of the alternatives or a combination of features from more than one alternative.

The Planning Alternatives under study are:

- **Alternative A: Enhancement of the Current Heber Dunes Experience**—Acknowledging that visitors are largely happy with the current recreation experience at Heber Dunes, this alternative builds on existing use patterns through minor enhancements reflective of visitor input.
- **Alternative B: Expanded Recreation Facilities and Resource Management**—This alternative emphasizes the enhancement of both OHV and non-OHV recreational opportunities and greater protection of sensitive habitat.

3.2 USE AREAS

Use areas have been established as part of the General Plan process. The use areas are depicted in Figures 5 and 6. The Planning Alternatives address the following use areas:

- Northern Special Use Area
- Youth Riding Area
- Eastern Riding Area
- Transition Area
- Clay Pan Riding Area
- Dunes Riding Area
- Creosote Special Management Area

3.3 ALTERNATIVE A: ENHANCEMENT OF THE CURRENT HEBER DUNES EXPERIENCE

3.3.1 Overview

Under this alternative, Heber Dunes SVRA will be experienced as an extension of the pattern of visitor use found in the SVRA today. Acknowledging that visitors are, for the most part, happy with the current Heber

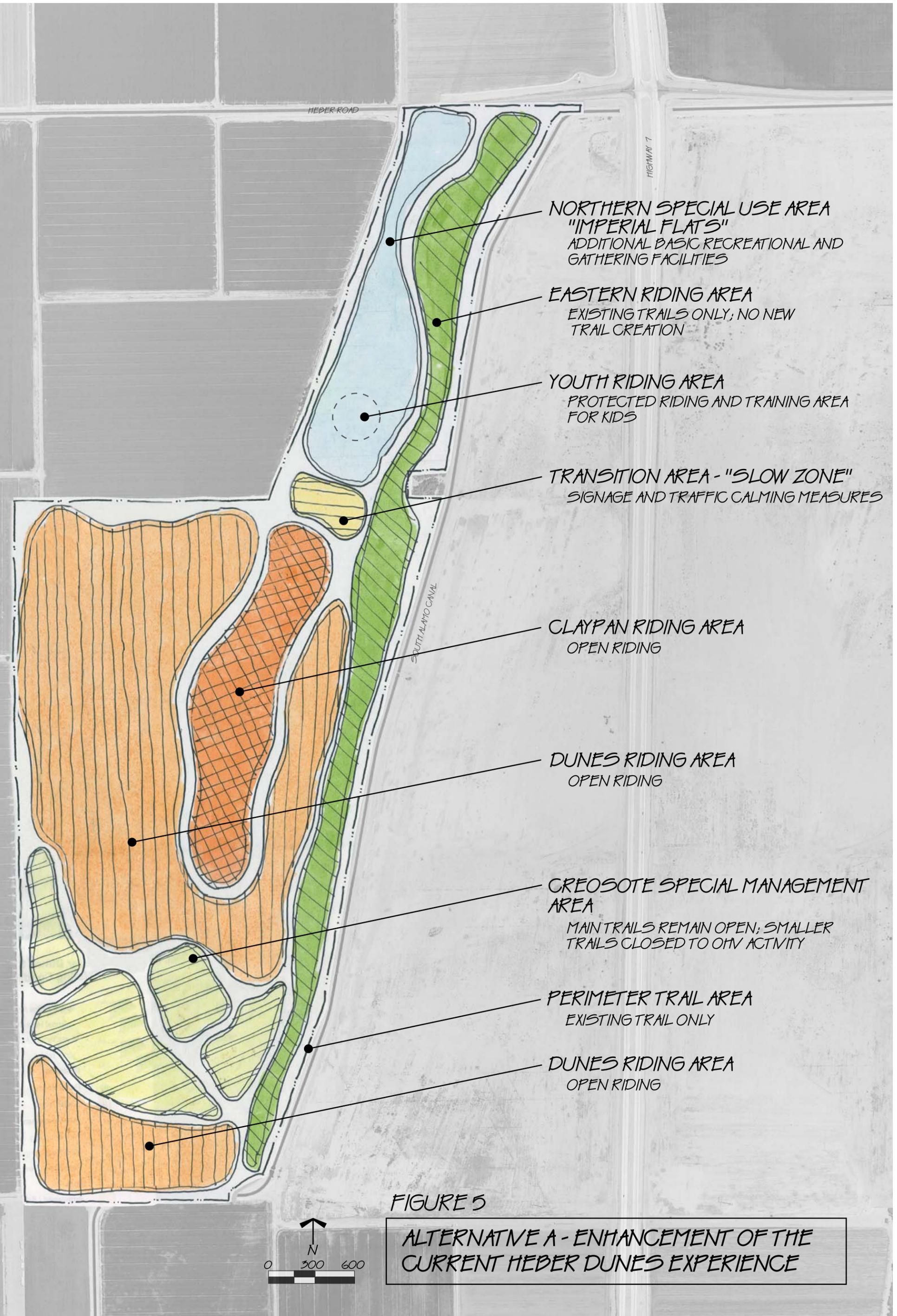


FIGURE 5

ALTERNATIVE A - ENHANCEMENT OF THE CURRENT HEBER DUNES EXPERIENCE

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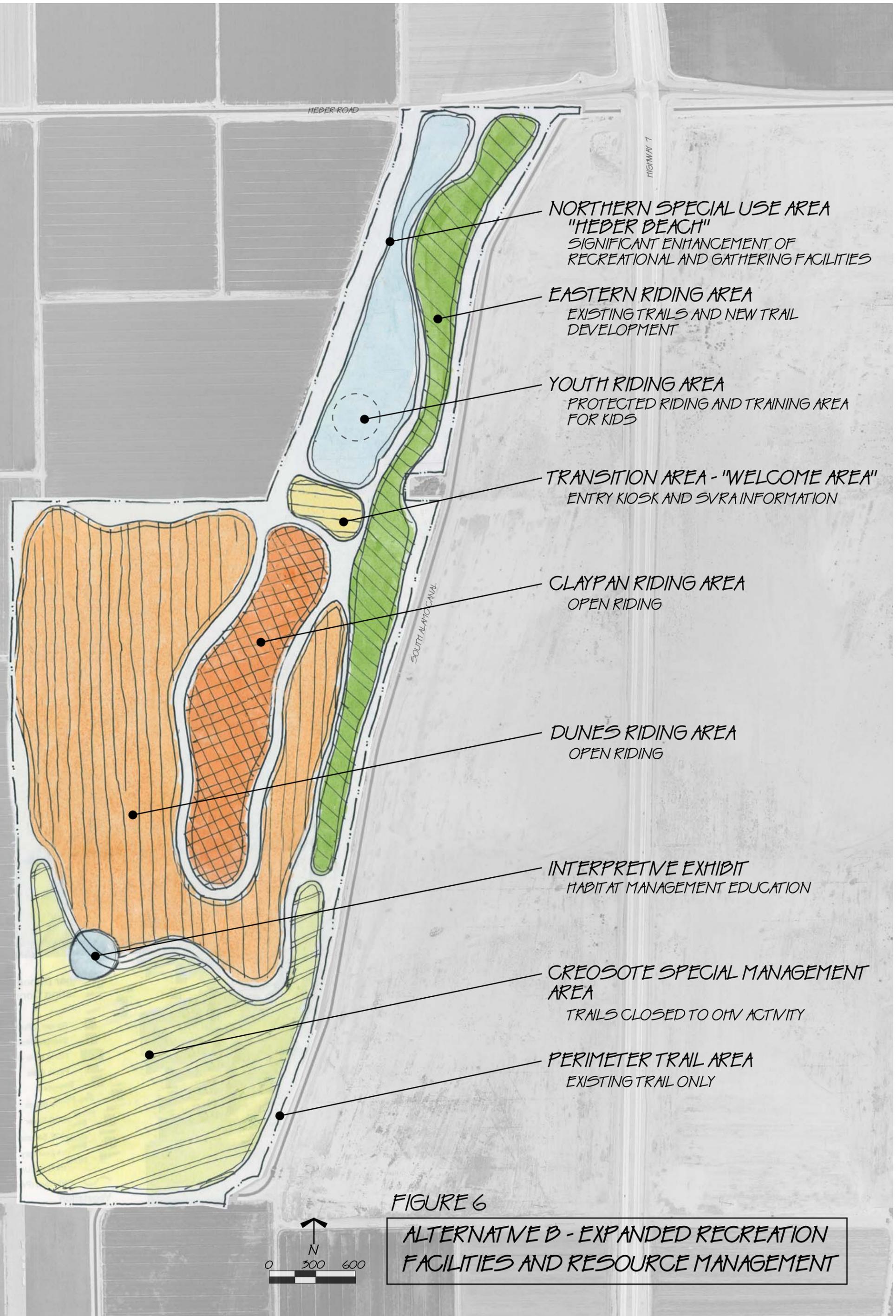


FIGURE 6

ALTERNATIVE B - EXPANDED RECREATION
FACILITIES AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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Dunes experience, this alternative builds on existing visitor use patterns and limits improvements primarily to those identified by visitors and other stakeholders.

3.3.2 Use Areas

Northern Special Use Area: “Imperial Flats”

Under Alternative A, Imperial Flats is envisioned much as it is today: a relatively undeveloped open area with pockets of trees and shrubs that provide shade. The majority of the components of this alternative have been derived from input provided by visitors and other stakeholders. Features of Imperial Flats may include:

- single and clustered ramadas, barbeque facilities, and fire pits to support social gathering and
- passive recreational facilities, such as horseshoe pits.

Transition Area: “Slow Zone”

A Slow Zone would be created in the transition area. The Slow Zone would serve as a transition area between the social gathering area in Imperial Flats and the clay pan open riding area. Features used to establish the Slow Zone may include signage and traffic calming measures (such as speed bumps or textured surfaces).

Eastern Riding Area

Open riding would be allowed within the Eastern Riding Area. New trails would not be created in this area under Alternative A.

Creosote Special Management Area

Under Alternative A, primary trails within the creosote scrub habitat area would remain open, but smaller side trails (secondary and tertiary trails) would be closed to OHV activity. The secondary and tertiary trails essentially bisect the creosote scrub habitat into small individual dune mounds with little or no habitat between them. Under this type of management implementation of some restoration on the closure areas would be possible to help protect the soil crust and restore the native understory vegetation and wildlife use.

3.4 ALTERNATIVE B: EXPANDED RECREATION FACILITIES AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

3.4.1 Overview

This alternative emphasizes the enhancement of both OHV and non-OHV recreational opportunities and greater protection of sensitive habitat. Non-OHV recreational uses are concentrated in the Northern Special Use Area called Heber Beach.

3.4.2 Use Areas

Northern Special Use Area: “Heber Beach”

Heber Beach has the potential to become a signature feature of Heber Dunes under this alternative. The area is envisioned as providing opportunities for social gathering and associated recreational opportunities. Under this alternative, Heber Beach is separated from other uses to create a safe, designated area for non-OHV recreation. Alternative B would include all of the recreational components from the Imperial Flats area in Alternative A, plus:

- walking paths with interpretive programming sited to maximize opportunities for shade,
- vehicular access to Heber Beach from Heber Dunes Road would be prohibited to create a safe pedestrian environment within Heber Beach,
- Beginner’s Riding Area for adolescents and adults (The area will be designed for riders over the age of 12. Equipment will be less than 150 cubic centimeters [cc]), and
- Children’s Play Area.

Transition Area: Welcome Area

A “Welcome Area” would be created in the transition area under Alternative B. An entry kiosk would be located within the Welcome Area. This area would provide a place for visitors to obtain information about the SVRA and would formally introduce the DPR presence at the SVRA. Likewise, the Welcome Area would separate the non-OHV recreational uses in Heber Beach from the open riding areas to the south. This separation of uses would improve safety conditions and enhance the recreation experience in both the OHV and non-OHV use areas.

Eastern Riding Area

Some unmanaged trails currently exist within the Eastern Riding Area. However, under Alternative B, new trail alignments would be created in this area. The new trails are envisioned to provide an interesting riding experience that capitalizes on existing topography and vegetation.

Creosote Special Management Area

Management activities associated with the Creosote Special Management Area would be expanded under this alternative. The creosote scrub habitat in the southern end of the SVRA would be closed to OHV activity (see Figure 6) to protect this habitat from impacts associated with OHV riding. However, the saltbush scrub and arrowweed/saltbush scrub habitats located just south of the creosote scrub habitat would also be closed to OHV activity to reduce the potential for riders to cut through the creosote scrub habitat to arrive in these southernmost portions of the SVRA. From a management perspective, closing the entire southern area to riding would help control entry to the creosote scrub habitat. It should be noted that the perimeter trail would not be affected by the closure of the southern area; riding would still be allowed along the entire extent of the perimeter trail.

Under this alternative, an interpretive exhibit would be established along the northern border of the Creosote Special Management Area. The exhibit would convey information about Heber Dunes' natural resources, with an emphasis on the value of the creosote scrub habitat and the effects of human disturbance on this habitat.

3.5 COMMON ELEMENTS

The following elements are common to both alternatives.

Youth Riding Area

DPR is in the process of establishing a protected Youth Riding Area within the Northern Special Use Area just north of Heber Beach Road. The creation of the Youth Riding Area will occur outside of the General Plan process. The Youth Riding Area will provide a safe, stable area restricted from other more experienced riders. Equipment will be limited to 90 cc or less. The area will be designed with riders roughly between the ages of 5 and 12 in mind.

Clay Pan Riding Area

Under Alternatives A and B, the Clay Pan Riding Area would be an "open riding" area, meaning that no restrictions would be placed on riding within this area. Some individual and group ramadas would be established within this area in response to visitor and other stakeholder interest.

Dunes Riding Area

Under Alternatives A and B, the Dunes Riding Area would be an "open riding" area. Some individual and group ramadas would be installed within this area in response to visitor and other stakeholder interest.

Perimeter Trail Area

The Perimeter Trail Area would be established under both alternatives to preserve the existing route that visitors use to ride OHVs around the outer limits of the SVRA.

REFERENCES

EDAW AECOM (EDAW)

- 2009a *Major Themes Working Paper: Heber Dunes SVRA General Plan*. San Diego, CA. May 2009.

- 2009b *Heber Dunes SVRA General Plan. Revised Working Paper #2: Existing Conditions, Issues, and Opportunities, Draft Park Unit, Vision, and Goals*. San Diego, CA. July 2009.

