

America's Newest National Park

September 2004

Fact Sheet

- On Monday, September 13, 2004, Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton signed the letter of determination to officially create the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve. This determination by the Secretary is required by the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve Act, passed overwhelmingly by Congress and signed into law on November 22, 2000. The legislation was sponsored by Colorado Senators Wayne Allard and Ben Nighthorse Campbell, and U.S. Representative Scott McInnis. According to this Act, "When the Secretary determines that sufficient land having a sufficient diversity of resources has been acquired to warrant designation of the land as a national park, the Secretary shall establish the Great Sand Dunes National Park in the State of Colorado...as a unit of the National Park System." Before this act was passed, the Great Sand Dunes National Monument was 38,659 acres, protecting primarily only the main dunefield.

- The new park and preserve is approximately 150,000 acres (roughly $\frac{3}{4}$ the size of Rocky Mountain National Park). The Great Sand Dunes system is highly diverse, containing alpine tundra (including six peaks over 13,000' in elevation), ancient forests of spruce fir, alpine lakes, aspen and cottonwood groves, massive dunes, streams, grasslands, and wetlands. Wildlife is also diverse: Rocky Mountain species such as elk, bighorn sheep, black bear, pikas, and ptarmigan; desert species including kangaroo rats, short-horned lizards, and insects endemic to Great Sand Dunes; grassland species including pronghorn, prairie dogs, jack rabbits and badgers; and wetland species such as sandhill cranes, leopard frogs, beavers, avocets, and white-faced ibis.

- In addition to the new national park, the bill authorized the creation of a new 92,617 acre Baca National Wildlife Refuge, and the addition of 14,000' Kit Carson Peak and surrounding lands (13,599 acres total) into the Rio Grande National Forest.

- Statistics: The park contains the tallest dunes in North America: 750'. The main dunefield is about 30 square miles in area, surrounded by smaller dunes. The visitor center and campground are situated at 8166' elevation. The highest dunes reach over 8700' above elevation. The tallest mountain in the park and preserve is Tijeras Peak, 13,604'. Annual visitation currently averages 280,000 per year.

- Countless groups have worked tirelessly to create the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, including: The Nature Conservancy; National Park Service; Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton and staff; Department of Justice staff; Senator Allard and staff; Senator Nighthorse Campbell and staff; Representative McInness and staff; former Secretary Bruce Babbitt; Governor Bill Owens; Colorado Attorney General Ken Salazar; US Forest Service; US Fish and Wildlife Service; Bureau of Land Management; Colorado State Land Board; Colorado Division of Wildlife; the Yale University Endowment Fund; Alamosa and Saguache County commissioners; The Friends of the Dunes; the Ladies' PEO; and many San Luis Valley organizations and individuals.

- The dunes themselves were originally designated a National Monument by Herbert Hoover in 1932, through the efforts of local citizens, including the Ladies' PEO chapters of the San Luis Valley. Local efforts have also spearheaded the new national park and preserve effort, in part to protect the valley's aquifer from water export to Colorado's Front Range cities. This aquifer is an essential component in the geological stability of the Great Sand Dunes system, as well as a historic source of water for San Luis Valley ranchers and farmers.

- The Baca Ranch is the final part of land acquisition to create the national park, with a purchase price of approximately \$31 million. The Baca has been jointly owned by a number of corporate and private

parties involved in large-scale commercial water development and export, as well as some livestock ranching. Congress has already appropriated approximately \$28 million toward the purchase. The remaining \$3 million needed to close on the property is being provided initially by the Nature Conservancy, but Congress is expected to approve the remaining funds in FY2005. Management of the national park portion of the Baca will be by the National Park Service in consultation with the Nature Conservancy. Other portions of the Baca Ranch will be managed jointly by The Nature Conservancy, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the US Forest Service until Congress appropriates the remaining funding necessary to fully acquire the ranch.

- There will not be immediate access to the Baca Ranch area. The current primary owner will have time to relocate. After that, federal agencies may not open the area until initial reconnaissance can be done to determine appropriate use, access, and resource protection needs.

- Even after The Nature Conservancy's interest in the Baca Ranch is acquired by the US, the Nature Conservancy will continue to own and manage the Medano and Zapata Ranches and over 1000 bison that roam these ranches. The portions of these ranches that lie within federal boundaries will eventually also become part of the national park and the national wildlife refuge.

Great Sand Dunes National Park chronology

1807 Zebulon Pike records the earliest known written description of the Great Sand Dunes: *"After marching some miles, we discovered ... at the foot of the White Mountains [today's Sangre de Cristos] which we were then descending, sandy hills... Their appearance was exactly that of the sea in a storm, except as to color, not the least sign of vegetation existing thereon."*

1848 John C. Fremont crossed the Sangre de Cristos into the San Luis Valley in winter, courting disaster but proving that a winter crossing of this range was possible. He was followed by Captain John Gunnison in 1853 and others in later years, as westward expansion continued.

1932 Members of the Ladies PEO chapter of Monte Vista sponsored a bill to Congress asking for national monument status for the Great Sand Dunes.

1932 Great Sand Dunes National Monument was established by President Herbert Hoover.

1970s USGS first defines the extent of the Great Sand Dunes system.

1990s Increased research at Great Sand Dunes shows that streamflow and ground water play an important role in the development of the dunes system, culminating in the realization that the dramatic dunefield is the end product of greater geologic processes throughout the dunes system.

November 22, 2000 Congress passes the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve Act, which created Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, and it is signed by then President Bill Clinton. The National Preserve is created from lands already in federal ownership, mostly within the Rio Grande National Forest. The bill also authorizes the purchase of the Baca Ranch, "...with the consent of the owner thereof." The eastern part of the Baca Ranch, which includes part of the dunefield, is to be managed by the National Park Service as part of Great Sand Dunes National Park. The western section is to be managed by the US Fish and Wildlife Service as part of a newly designated Baca National Wildlife Refuge. The section of the Baca Ranch containing Kit Carson Peak is to be managed by the US Forest Service as part of the Rio Grande National Forest.

September 10, 2004 The Baca Ranch is purchased by The Nature Conservancy for eventual inclusion in Great Sand Dunes National Park, the Baca National Wildlife Refuge, and the Rio Grande National Forest.

September 13, 2004 Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton signs the letter of determination as required by the law which authorized the expansion of Great Sand Dunes National Monument. "When the Secretary determines that sufficient land having a sufficient diversity of resources has been acquired to warrant designation of the land as a national park, the Secretary shall establish the Great Sand Dunes National Park in the State of Colorado...as a unit of the National Park System." The Act continues: "Such establishment shall be effective upon publication of a notice of the Secretary's determination in the Federal Register." This notice is expected to be published within the next few days.