

Matt Stout & Brian Dowling | June 4, 2016

Plover plan may open beaches

Some backlash, but businesses in favor



Credit: Nicolaus Czarnecki

The Piping Plover habitat on Revere Beach in Revere.

State and federal wildlife officials are huddling next week to hash out a plan to open up acres of sandy shoreline reserved for piping plovers, the endangered birds whose protected nesting spots have for decades kept prime beach real estate off-limits to Bay State sunbathers.

The “working” meeting between the state and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services officials slated for Tuesday is intended to finalize a submission state officials hope to use to score a 25-year permit from the feds, allowing them to scale back fencing

designed to rope off plover nests by as many as two to four acres, or 10 to 20 percent, depending on the beach.

But the plan has drawn fire from some, who laid into the state in more than 140 comments submitted to the feds. “Loosening laws will certainly deplete the bird populations further by stressing them with noise pollution and contaminating the sands with fumes,” one submission reads. “It’s time to stop being greedy, selfish and ignorant.”

Said another: “In no way should public access increase on beaches with nesting piping plovers. This is absurd. The birds are endangered, have been protected for years and populations have not recovered remarkably.”

The plover population, deemed threatened in the mid-1980s as it plunged to 139 breeding pairs in Massachusetts, has rebounded five-fold, with more than 680 pairs counted as of last year at more than 30 beaches stretching from Provincetown to Newbury. The goal was to reach 625.

Their presence has continually ruffled feathers of the state’s beachgoers, who are barred from swaths of the shore reserved for the stocky, sandy-colored birds.

The proposal was greeted as welcome news by business owners on Revere Beach, which is peppered with plover plots. Santorini restaurant owner Nihat Aktas hopes the state reclaims the habitat that’s roped-off right in front of his eatery.

“Separating off the beach, I’m losing money, I’m losing customers,” Aktas told the Herald. “Take it off before the weather gets hot and the

schools close and our business picks up.”

Vinny Lauretano, owner of the Pizza Kitchen Cafe, said the plovers are a bane to his seaside business, which for decades has fed beachgoers next to the nearby bathhouse.

“Once you start to take away from the necessities of the beach — food and bathrooms — you have a problem,” he told the Herald. “There has to be a way to take the birds out of the public’s way.”

Peter Lorenz, a spokesman for the state’s office of energy and environmental affairs, stressed that “this is still a fluid plan.”

“The state’s plan looks to use the success of plover restoration to allow for more access to beaches,” Lorenz said.

A draft plan in January called for cutting back on fencing in “high-use recreational” areas by 10 percent, and for up to five beaches, by 20 percent. It also would allow officials to open up roads and parking lots where

birds may settle and some off-road vehicles to drive past nesting sites.

The Massachusetts Audubon Society, in comments it submitted to the feds, said it “provisionally supports” the plan, but it also called for changes. “Despite the gains made by plovers, their future is not secure, and our understanding of them is not complete to allow us to assign nesting to certain beaches and exclude them from other beaches,” the group wrote.

Meagan Racey, a spokeswoman for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, said the agency plans to make a final decision by “early summer” and called Tuesday’s internal meeting an “indication of that progress.”

Dora Higuera, whose beachside house is across from a roped-off plover habitat, said they are welcome neighbors.

“They don’t take anything from anybody,” she said, defending the pint-sized birds. “They are just surviving there.”