

Editorial

Are land swaps the best deal for the taxpayers?

Record Searchlight
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Does the BLM's plan to swap a patch of land west of Redding known as "Area 51" for a private parcel in Trinity County make sense and serve the public?

To the Bureau of Land Management, the swap fits into a long-running plan to rid itself of scattered parcels while consolidating in areas of special public value.

To most of Area 51's neighbors, the land is valuable open space and vibrant wildlife habitat -- except for a few who see the scrubland as a fire hazard abutting their back yards.

To bicyclists and hikers, the area is a fun-filled maze of trails that forms a critical part of the network linking Redding with Whiskeytown National Recreation Area.

To the state Department of Fish and Game, the swap threatens important salmon habitat in Salt Creek, one of the Sacramento River's last major tributaries before Keswick Dam. That is, it did until last week, when biologists, flip-flopping like a trout pulled onto a riverbank, said the government should also protect the property on the other side of the swap, the erosion-prone Grass Valley Creek watershed, which feeds the Trinity River.

As the evolving views of Fish and Game vividly illustrate, judging the value of a piece of land, especially when intangibles like habitat and recreation are weighed, is devilishly difficult. Meanwhile, property appraisals in swaps are kept secret until the deals close.

There's an old-fashioned way of putting a price on things: the open market. The BLM, which has some 100,000 Shasta County acres on its disposal list, could easily auction off land that serves no major public purpose yet is cumbersome and expensive to manage, especially where the property lies in the path of Redding-area growth.

Unlike the opaque land-swap process that rewards speculators who can get their hands on a piece of land the BLM wants, open auctions would ensure that taxpayers get the best price for public land by letting developers or other interested parties bid for it.

Such sales would not necessarily mean that greenbelts would give way to houses. Shasta County has cities and community services districts seeking land for parks, at least one deep-pocketed foundation that spends money preserving open space, an active land trust, neighbors who might pay to preserve their greenbelts and countless private citizens with a yen for elbow room.

With cash in hand, public agencies could purchase environmentally sensitive properties as appropriate. In southern Nevada, where the BLM owns most of the land around fast-growing Las Vegas, such auctions have raised \$1.6 billion since late 1999 (though the Bush administration recently provoked a local furor by proposing to raid the fund for federal deficit reduction).

Land swaps have their benefits. The BLM has in the past decade consolidated a corridor of public land along Clear Creek from the Sacramento to Whiskeytown National Recreation Area and in the Sacramento bend north of Red Bluff, ensuring public access to and good stewardship of a pair of beautiful areas. Still, shuffling of public lands from those held by historical accident to those held for beneficial reasons today is painfully slow. Local BLM Director Steve Anderson acknowledged last week that it won't be finished during his career.

Why doesn't the BLM simply auction the land it no longer wants? Officials say such sales would go into a fund that any federal agency could tap. In other words, there's no benefit for the BLM. That sounds like an agency more interested in protecting its turf than guarding ecologically sensitive lands.

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