

## BLM OKs Area 51 swap

### Shasta Resources Council plans protest to keep land public

By Dylan Darling, Record Searchlight  
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A public playground for hikers and mountain bikers tucked among subdivisions west of Redding will be swapped for salmon habitat in the Trinity River watershed unless last-ditch protests are successful.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) announced Wednesday it had approved the trade of the 215-acre "Area 51" off Victoria Drive near Shasta for 566 acres along Trinity County's Grass Valley Creek.

"When you weighed the pros and cons, clearly the Grass Valley Creek land served a better public interest," said Steve Anderson, field manager of the BLM's Redding office. "We feel the greater public interest is served in this exchange."

Hikers, bikers and a nonprofit organization formed to try to keep the land public had argued that Area 51's trails and Salt Creek needed to be preserved.

The Grass Valley Creek parcel is surrounded by about 16,000 acres of land that the BLM has acquired in hopes of improving habitat for salmon that swim up the Trinity River from the Pacific Ocean.

Before the exchange -- with Joe Rice, a Humboldt County man who owns the Grass Valley acreage -- there is a window for people to file written protests until June 19.

Anderson said whether Area 51 becomes private depends on if any protests are filed and how long they take to resolve.

Shasta Resources Council, the nonprofit created last year to fight for Area 51, plans to mount a formal challenge.



"At this point it is a shock," said Randall Hauser, council chairman.

The Redding Mountain Biking Club also is considering filing a protest, said Bob Boecking, president of the Redding Mountain Biking Club.

"Personally, I think mountain bikers made their voices very clear what they would like to see happen, and the BLM didn't want to hear it," he said.

Area 51 was listed for "disposal," or swap or sell, by the BLM in 1993. Rice proposed the trade for Area 51 five years ago.

In February, Hauser said there was a good chance Area 51, named after the secretive government air base in Nevada by mountain bikers because of its once-secret trails, would remain public.

He said the council thought it had the cooperation of BLM to come up with an alternative to trading the land. In hopes of keeping Area 51 public, the council had offered to buy it; buy land to swap for it, including the Grass Valley Creek land; or purchase other BLM-managed land, develop it and use the profits to buy Area 51.

Hauser said the council would have paid the fair market price if the BLM had been willing to sell the land. The Grass Valley Creek property was appraised at \$763,000, while Area 51 was appraised at \$900,000. Rice will pay the difference if the deal goes through.

The latest idea from the Shasta Resources Council was to acquire the land from the BLM and then sell 20 percent of it to residents along Victoria Drive to extend their backyards deeper into the brush. The money raised through those sales would have gone to pay for the purchase of Area 51, Hauser said.

If the trade with Rice is finalized, the council would need to deal with him and any developers he might involve to keep Area 51's 5.2 miles of trails open, Hauser said.

"They are going to say, 'You want all these creeks and trails and that stuff? Well fine, buy it,'" Hauser said. "They are going to ask a fortune for it."

Rice did not return messages left Wednesday afternoon by the Record

Searchlight.

If the protests can't be resolved by Anderson, they will be handled by the BLM's state director. If the challenges are rejected, people still would have a chance to influence how Area 51 should be managed by talking to its owner or to the Shasta County Planning Department, Anderson said.

"We are completing a land exchange, we are not deciding what the final use is," he said.

Written protests may be sent to Steve Anderson, Redding Field Manager, BLM, 355 Hemsted Drive, Redding, CA 96002.

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