

# BLM rejects bid for Area 51

State chief will make decision on the land swap

By Dylan Darling, Record Searchlight  
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The federal government has rejected a bid by users of Area 51 to buy the land they say they want to keep public.

Mike Pool, U.S. Bureau of Land Management state director, said the agency had considered every reasonable alternative or proposal of what to do with the 216-acre parcel known as Area 51 before deciding in April to swap it for 566 acres along Grass Valley Creek in the Trinity River watershed.

"Among the several alternatives considered, selling the federal parcel to another interested party was thoroughly analyzed," Pool wrote in a letter Friday. "The April decision concluded that an exchange, rather than sale of the public land, was in the public's interest."

The trade, which has been on the table for five years, is still pending while the BLM reviews written protests. The BLM's Redding field office passed 17 protests to the state office in late June and is waiting to hear from Pool about them.

"The state director has to decide to accept or reject," said Steve Anderson, field office manager.

He said he expects the process to be complete by the end of the month.

As part of the BLM process of exchanging land, the Redding field office opened a 45-day window for written protests when it announced it was going to go through with the exchange April 26. The window closed June 19.

On the same day, the Shasta Resources Council, a grass-roots group formed in February 2005 to preserve Area 51 and the 5.2 miles of trails that crisscross it, offered to buy the land for \$900,000.

"It is very sad that the federal government has chosen to reject a sincere and legitimate offer from the community to purchase Area 51 for public use," wrote Randy Hauser, head of the Shasta Resources Council, in an e-mail. "Instead, the BLM appears determined to pass the land into the hands of (a) private speculator for no justifiable reason, destroying forever the possibility of keeping Area 51 in

public ownership to be enjoyed for generations to come."

Joe Rice, a Humboldt County resident who owns the property along Grass Valley Creek, couldn't be reached for comment.

The offer was the latest in many attempts by the Shasta Resource Council over the past year and a half in trying to keep Area 51 accessible to the public. The land got its nickname from mountain bikers who named it after the secret military base in Nevada because so few people knew of its trails.

Other offers included buying other BLM land around Redding, then selling it and using the profit to purchase Area 51, and buying the Trinity River watershed land from Rice to trade to the BLM. Those offers were rejected as well.

The Shasta Coalition for the Preservation of Public Land, a sister group to the Shasta Resources Council, is threatening to file legal action against the BLM if it goes through with the Area 51 exchange. The group had turned in the most voluminous protest to the exchange — weighing in at 3 pounds.

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