

Editorial

BLM should give neighbors a shot at saving Area 51

By Bruce Ross, Record Searchlight
April 5, 2005

It's a rare day when a federal agency should be encouraged to delay and study a decision beyond the usual demands of red tape, but the Bureau of Land Management's proposed swap of "Area 51," west of Redding, is a case where waiting might best serve the public.

In principle, there's nothing wrong with the BLM's trading off property that has no particular value to the public, especially in exchange for land with more recreational potential or ecological significance. Rational management is good for the land and good for the taxpayers.

When neighbors jump into action to preserve a piece of land, however, it sends a clear signal about its worth as public property. The prospect of a developer's subdividing Area 51, a 215-acre jumble in the triangle formed by Swasey Drive, Lower Springs Road and Highway 299, has provoked just such organizing.

The land swap's opponents are not engaged in knee-jerk naysaying, but have crafted a well-reasoned if ambitious plan to form a park district that could buy and manage Area 51, as well as other BLM properties up for disposal around Shasta.

But shepherding such a plan from concept into action takes time -- to draw boundaries, to organize a ballot to gauge the interest of voters, to create an acceptable financing scheme. The citizens starting from scratch don't have bureaucratic momentum on their side.

The preservation team's biggest problem would be raising money to buy Area 51, but a deal would not necessarily require the land to be sold. Part of the BLM's rationale for shedding Area 51 is that the hills of brushy forest, now surrounded by houses, are a fire hazard that the bureau does not have the resources to adequately tend. If a local district pitched in the time and money to manage the property, that would allay the problem of too few BLM employees overseeing too much widely scattered acreage.

Indeed, the BLM has just such an arrangement in Trinity County, where the Trinity Resource Conservation District entered into a "stewardship contract" to preserve 1,000 acres overlooking Weaverville. The Weaverville Community Forest was on track to be traded to Sierra Pacific Industries for logging, but strong local interest in keeping the land public eventually swayed decision-makers.

The vigilant action of Area 51's defenders shows a similar motivation to keep the parcel available for hiking and mountain-biking and as simple open space in rapidly developing Shasta. The government should not cave to the noisiest faction, but it should recognize a swell of public interest when it crests.

It is possible that the plan to create a park district could run into insurmountable financial or political obstacles, but the neighbors at least deserve a reasonable chance to try.

Once developed, the patch of open space will be gone forever. That makes a six-month delay seem piddling.

Copyright 2005, Redding. All Rights Reserved.