

Group still wants Area 51

Preservationists seek way to keep site public land

**By Dylan Darling, Record Searchlight**

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If they can't strike a deal with the federal government, Area 51 preservationists will try to bargain with the Humboldt County man set to obtain the parcel west of Redding in a land swap, they said Friday.

The latest idea to keep Area 51 open to the public is to buy the 566-acre patch of timberland in Trinity County that owner Joe Rice wants to trade with the Bureau of Land Management.

But that's just a backup plan.

Randall Hauser, chair of the Shasta Resources Council (SRC), said the chances are "very good" that Area 51 will remain public. BLM officials wouldn't comment, saying that the decision process regarding the swap should be finished in 30 to 60 days.

Mountain bikers named the 214-acre Area 51 after the secret military facility in the Nevada desert.

The SRC, formed last spring to oppose the swap, led state BLM Director Mike Pool on a tour of the land Friday morning. About 40 people turned out, including a staff member for Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-California, other BLM officials and three mountain bikers -- along with their bikes.

Rice, who hasn't made clear what he wants to do with Area 51, wasn't on the tour and couldn't be reached for comment. But present on the tour was a voice for developing Area 51.

Brent Owen said he has a written agreement with Rice to buy part of the property to build a new home on if the swap goes through. And he made clear during Friday's tour that he thinks the swap is a good idea.

He also made clear his opinion about a letter SRC wrote to Rice in May 2005 about buying the Trinity parcel, called Grass Valley Creek. He said the letter, which simply says the group is interested in buying the land, was not a legitimate offer because it didn't include a price.

"You want to buy it, give me an offer," was how Owen characterized Rice's reaction to the letter.

Hauser said the SRC would not make an offer until the government finishes appraisals on Area 51 and the Grass Valley Creek property. Grass Valley Creek is a key salmon spawning ground with a silt problem caused by crumbling granite.

Pool said final appraisals should be ready in two weeks.

The BLM has had controversies erupt before when it planned to sell or swap a piece of land. When the land is out in the wilderness, such swaps are paid little attention. But controversy can ensue if the land gets discovered.

"They get attached, very attached," Pool said.

Area 51, located east of Shasta, contains 5.2 miles of trails, along with stands of pine and manzanita, and Salt Creek.

The SRC first proposed to buy Area 51 outright last spring. This winter, the group said it would buy Area 51 and other unwanted pieces of BLM land and then sell some of the land to homebuilders to pay for the purchases. But it is unclear how they would finance such a plan.

Hauser said the idea put forth this winter is still the proposal on the table, but if it falls through, the SRC would try to deal directly with Rice.

The BLM first announced the possible swap with Rice in fall 2004.

At a January Shasta County supervisors meeting, Steven Anderson, BLM's Redding field manager, said a decision on the proposed swap could come in mid-February.

Another person on Friday's tour who said he wouldn't mind seeing Area 51 developed is Wes Davis, who lives a house away from the end of Victoria Drive, one of the gateways to Area 51. He said he has been pushing for 15 years for added fire safety, and a development could provide that by creating a new escape route.

If the land isn't developed, he said the thick vegetation should be thinned because of the fire risk.

"All it is to me is another piece of property that should be taken care of," Davis said.

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