

Group offers to buy Area 51

Shasta Resources Council says area must be saved for bikers

By Dylan Darling, Record Searchlight

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Along with more than a dozen written protests to the trade of "Area 51," the federal Bureau of Land Management has received an offer from a group that wants to keep hiking boots and mountain bike tires on its trails.

"We are interested in purchasing it -- that's our focus," said Randy Hauser, head of the Shasta Resources Council, a grassroots group formed in February 2005 to acquire the public land west of Redding. "We want to purchase it for the community."

Area 51 is a 216-acre slice of nature off the end of Victoria Drive, northeast of Swasey Drive and northwest of Lower Springs Road.

Steve Anderson, BLM's Redding field manager, said this isn't the first time the council has sought to buy the land, named by local mountain bikers after the top-secret government base in Nevada because of its once-secret stature.

Referring to an earlier offer, Anderson said, "The answer, in essence, was no." In April, the BLM Redding field office announced it would swap the parcel, which is crisscrossed by 5.2 miles of trails, for 566 privately held acres in the Trinity River watershed that are upstream of important salmon rearing habitat.

But because 17 formal written protests to the land exchange had been filed with the BLM by the Monday deadline, a final decision is now in the hands of Mike Pool, BLM state director.

Pool could let the deal stand, amend it or halt it altogether. When he makes a decision depends on how long it takes him to review all the protests, officials said. Those who filed protests will have the chance to appeal if Pool decides to trade the lands.

The resources council did not file a protest, opting instead to send its purchase proposal directly to Pool on Monday. Hauser said his group is offering \$900,000 to buy the land.

"The funding is there," he said. "There is enough of concern in the community that there are enough people who will step forward."

Hauser would not say where the money would come from.

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

A sister organization to Hauser's group, the Shasta Coalition for the Preservation of Public Land, submitted a protest that was 2 inches thick and weighed 3 pounds.

In it, the coalition contended that the BLM did not involve the public in the exchange process, its environmental review was not based on accurate information and that appraisals for the two parcels overvalued the Grass Valley Creek land and undervalued Area 51.

"I think that the way the BLM has structured the trade is definitely not in the public interest," said Susan Weale, coalition chair.

Weale said her group is ready to appeal the exchange in federal court if the protests are unsuccessful.

"If they say, 'Thank you for coming, we are going to trade it anyway,' then we will go to federal court. We have no other choice," she said.

Other protests include trail easements, wildlife protection and preserving a place for people to exercise.

"Trading Area 51 is a misuse of public land," wrote Ann Jensen, who owns land adjacent to Area 51, in her June 12 letter. "I urge you to think about the long-term effects of this trade. When it's gone, there is no bringing it back."

Joseph Patten of Redding wrote a letter supporting the swap, saying the BLM is trying to consolidate its land holdings for good reason. Officials have said the Grass Valley Creek property would fill a hole in the middle of 16,000 acres of public land they have set aside for restoration.

"I may not have all the details relating to Area 51, but it just seems to me that the main protesters want to continue what appears to me to be almost a private trail system," Patten wrote in his May 13 letter.

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