

Area 51 swap to continue

Despite protests, BLM decides land trade is good plan

By Dylan Darling, Record Searchlight
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The Bureau of Land Management's state office has approved the trade of 215 acres of public land west of Redding for 566 acres along a tributary of the Trinity River, dismissing 19 letters by people and groups opposed to the swap.

"After careful consideration of the points raised in each of the protest letters submitted to us, I have determined that proceeding with the exchange is in the best public interest," Mike Pool, BLM's state director, said Friday in a written announcement.

But before the swap of what has been called "Area 51" is complete, there will be a 30-day window for appeals.

There likely will be appeals, said Randy Hauser, head of the Shasta Resources Council. He said he is not sure if his group, which formed in February 2005 in hopes of keeping Area 51 open to the public, will appeal.

But there are other groups with the same goal that will, he said. "We are going to keep trying. ... (The swap) is not in the public interest."

The land was named Area 51 by mountain bikers because its 5.2 miles of trails were a kept secret among them for years.

BLM's Redding office announced April 26 that it planned to go through with the swap, which has been in the works for five years. The decision was then up for public protest until June 19, when the office sent the collected letters to the state office for review.

At the time, BLM's Redding manager, Steve Anderson, said the state office would respond to the protests and make a decision by the end of June.

Three months and a week later, the decision was announced. BLM state spokeswoman Jan Bedrosian said the process took longer than expected because of the time needed to analyze the arguments in the protest letters.

"That took a while, but we wanted to get it right," she said.

If there are no appeals, the trade could be complete in several months, Bedrosian said. If there are appeals, it could take years.

Joe Rice, a Humboldt County resident who owns the Trinity County property along Grass Valley Creek, could not be reached for comment.

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