

Citizens cannot change course of bureaucratic ship

Record Searchlight
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The state director of the Bureau of Land Management's decision this week to approve a trade off of Area 51 -- a 215-acre patch of public land near Shasta -- is unsurprising and, given the BLM's management plan, justifiable.

The Shasta-area property has been on the agency's list of excess property for more than a decade. The land swap will acquire nearly 600 acres of fragile watershed above the Trinity River that biologists deem important to restoring the river's prized salmon and steelhead.

At the same time, the swap leaves a sour taste.

A grass-roots group, the Shasta Resources Council, has fought the decision for two years. Preservationists argue that the miles of informal trails on the property are a recreational treasure, and that Salt Creek, one of the last tributaries feeding the Sacramento below Keswick Dam, is at least as important to fisheries as the parcel over the divide.

The swap's opponents have not merely stood in front of the bureaucratic train shouting, "Stop!" They have tried to craft creative ways to preserve the property and, at the last minute, handed the BLM an offer to buy the property at its appraised value, \$900,000, to preserve it.

None of that changed the BLM's course. Even if the agency had wanted to try something different, "nimble" and "flexible" are not words associated with the federal government.

You don't have to give a rip about open space, trails or fish to regret that committed local residents who were willing to pay to keep a patch of much-loved public land in public hands have been essentially powerless to sway their government's decisions.

Not that they've given up. They are appealing the decision and seeking the intervention of Rep. Wally Herger and California's senators. In a letter to the members of Congress, Randall Hauser, chairman of the Shasta Resources Council, wrote:

"If a community as ours feels so very strongly about the need to preserve certain public land and is willing to buy that land at full appraised value, it is a self-evident obligation of humane, democratic government to ensure that the community is given priority consideration and be allowed to buy it. In fact, such a community should be commended and honored at the highest level for assuming the formidable financial burden of providing for its own future and that of the greater public with its own resources."

Even recognizing the BLM's worthwhile goals, it's hard to dispute Hauser's logic.

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