

Group says federal status is still likely for the Bend Area

By GEOFF JOHNSON -DN Staff Writer, Red Bluff Daily News

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Shasta Cascade Wonderland Association General Manager Bob Warren... (DN-Johnson)

The head of the group that first pitched the idea of turning 17,600 acres of public land - the Sacramento River Bend Area - into a National Recreation Area believes success is just around the bend.

"I'm confident it will get through," said Bob Warren, general manager for the Shasta Cascade Wonderland Association and Redding's Tourism Bureau manager.

The differences between a bill written by Sen. Barbara Boxer and a similar bill proposed by Rep. Wally Herger are minor enough that the two may be able to put aside their differences and get something passed by the end of the congressional session.

Warren, along with Bureau of Land Management officials, headed up a tour of the area Wednesday afternoon for the visiting Sierra Nevada Conservancy.

The visit, part of a larger tour that included a visit to Sierra Pacific Industries, was meant to familiarize conservancy board members with local issues, Executive Officer Jim Branham said.

As a state organization, the conservancy is prohibited from lobbying or otherwise trying to influence the debate over whether to create the NRA. It can issue grants to local governments or give advice when asked, but has no authority of its own, Branham said.

Those lobbying restrictions do not extend to Warren's non-profit group, which first pitched the idea of a National Conservation Area almost two decades ago.

Try, try again

When the Wonderland Association approached Tehama County and Shasta County supervisors with a bill drafted by Boxer in 1993, it was rejected unanimously by both boards, Warren said. Supervisors in both counties opted in 2006 to support a bill written by Herger, which, among other things, changed the term "conservation" to "recreation." This version died in Congress. In December 2009, the Shasta County Board of Supervisors voted to support the project and recommend its inclusion in the National Land Conservation System, which would ensure funding for the

area but which Herger has argued would open it up to environmental lawsuits.

The issue is before Tehama County Supervisors, who are unlikely to vote to support or decline the idea for weeks.

Tourist Wonderland

The BLM's decision to drastically expand the Bend property it manages may be the only thing that prevented the area from becoming a private subdivision.

Pointing to a cliff-side house next to public land, Warren said, "Obviously, he would not invite you into his backyard to see the river."

General manager of the association for 19 years, Warren said the NRA designation would be a logical extension of the property's existing use. As the area is already nationally owned, Tehama County residents have a right to use it, but no more than residents from any other county or state.

Use of the area has increased dramatically. BLM estimates indicate visitors to the area have more than doubled in the past five years alone. None of that, however, is the result of marketing or the kind of map placement national designation would provide.

In other words, Warren argues, the national recognition would just alert people to something they already own.

"It's hard to promote an area that doesn't have a designation," he said.

There are other factors behind Warren's support. The association is clear about its mission statement to promote tourism in the North State and receives funding, in part, from Tehama and Shasta counties. Warren sees the opportunity for tourist income.

Australians spend as much as \$200,000 a year in Redding, he said. Canadians spend as much as \$6 million and \$2.5 million of that is spent in hotels, meaning the city collects transient occupancy taxes.

The United States is, for now, the only industrialized nation in the world that does not use tax dollars to promote tourism, yet it continues to attract foreign tourists. Part of the reason is the country offers enormous swaths of BLM land, Warren said.

Take out the trash

Residents of the nearby community of Bend have resisted the project for fear that new visitors will leave more than footprints behind.

Speeding traffic, litter and stray gunfire are problems reported by Bend residents as it stands, and some fear giving the area national attention will only worsen things.

Warren does not see it that way. People who come to see the area's natural resources are more likely to

treasure them to than to trash them, he said.

"For the most part, people that are traveling visitors don't want to destroy the land," Warren said.

The fact that NRA designation could increase BLM funding to the area, which officials describe as "close to zero," is something Warren argues could offset the damage done by increased crowds.

Whether or not Tehama County Supervisors agree remains to be seen.

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