



Fact-finding efforts under way in possible hatchery takeover

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How Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery is managed, and by whom, is still a topic of discussion for the Friends of the Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy and the California Department of Fish and Game, which is currently responsible for the facility.

Last week the Friends of the Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery met with members of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy to tour the facility and discuss the possibility of the SNC taking ownership of it.

According to SNC Mt. Whitney Area Manager Julie Bear, the DFG contacted the conservancy about a year ago to discuss transferring ownership of the local landmark. Bear explained the DFG does not want, or have a use for, the hatchery and would like to turn it over to a responsible, individual agency.

Sierra Nevada Conservancy Executive Officer Jim Branham addresses SNC board members and staff who toured the Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery on June 6. Behind Branham is Jim Riley, former manager of the hatchery and longtime member of the Friends of the Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery. Former Inyo County Supervisor Julie Bear (l) is now a SNC staff member. Photo submitted

When first contacting the SNC, the DFG said it had two options: turn the facility over to another state agency, or put the property up for auction and sell it at fair market value. Bear said the DFG director did not want to see the hatchery hit the auction block, because he didn't want a private party purchasing the facility, which has historic value to local residents.

In an effort to keep the hatchery under local direction, the DFG is hoping the SNC will be willing to assume ownership.

"The conservancy could take it, but we only want it temporarily," Bear said. "According to our attorneys, if we do take it, we would have the right to gift or donate it. Our being involved is just to help the community and sustain the property."

Before the SNC decides to take on ownership of the facility, Bear said the organization is making sure all its ducks are in a row, exactly what its role would be in the transfer and what the long-term result would be.

“The SNC Board has appropriated funds for fact-finding, and the DFG just did an appraisal and we hope to complete the due diligence by August,” Bear said. “We want to bring a decision point to the board by December, and until then we want to keep it moving along.”

The SNC has approved \$50,000 to conduct site surveys, planning and analysis with respect to the future management of the hatchery.

The Inyo County Board of Supervisors has gotten on board with the fact-finding process, and assigned staff members to participate in a series of discussions with the SNC and DFG to identify issues and areas of concern related to the transfer.

Also, the California Wildlife Conservation Board has been brought in on the discussion as it would be required to authorize any transfer of the property from the DFG to the SNC. The cooperating agencies have created a list of key issues that must be addressed before the SNC board can rule on the transfer. One of those issues is clarifying the process that would be used in the event of a transfer, and what restrictions the DFG would require if the transfer takes place.

The agency and organization have also developed an action plan that describes each entity’s area of responsibility as the “due diligence” and fact-finding efforts are under way. The Action plan also contains deadlines for completing the tasks it identifies.

Before a final ruling on the transfer is considered by the SNC board, Bear said all key parties, including Inyo County and the Friends of the Hatchery, will have to support the move.