

Debate over use of W'ville forests goes on

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By SALLY MORRIS

Debate over the future of the forests surrounding Weaverville continued last week as the Trinity County Board of Supervisors considered its stance on a pending land trade between the Bureau of Land Management and Sierra Pacific Industries, Inc.

The board received recommendations from a land trades subcommittee of the county's natural resources advisory council, but took no action and will consider the matter again in March.

The subcommittee was formed last August to examine issues raised by several Weaverville residents concerned about the prospect of more clear-cuts in the town's viewshed if approximately 1,000 acres of public land in the basin are traded to SPI for timber management.

The pending trade was of particular concern to residents in the Timber Ridge area because much of the land involved is located to the west of Weaverville on the ridge above their homes.

Potential erosion from logging and possible herbicide use in the town's watershed were other issues of concern.

The BLM has held up completion of the trade that was begun in 1996 and was expected to conclude by last December.

The land exchange involves about 2,600 acres in

several separate parcels in Trinity County, including approximately 1,000 acres in the Weaverville Basin. The exchange includes about 500 acres in Shasta County as well as land in the Lewiston and Douglas City areas slated to go to SPI in exchange for land the company owns along the Trinity River.

The goal of both BLM and SPI is to consolidate ownership of parcels for more efficient management. BLM plans to consolidate its ownership of land along the Trinity River to manage it for public use. SPI interests are in acquiring contiguous lands for more efficient timber management.

The county's land trade subcommittee included representatives of BLM and SPI at each meeting that also drew about 25 local residents and environmentalists. The group's recommendation to the board of supervisors, achieved by consensus, is that the county ask BLM to reserve its land in the Weaverville Basin for three years while the county or another entity attempts to purchase it for a model community forest. The group also recommended that the board reaffirm its current policy opposing any net loss of private land in the county.

These were the only options that achieved consensus, though several other al-

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ternatives were considered. SPI and BLM opposed an alternative asking BLM to retain the trade lands in the Weaverville Basin. SPI also rejected the prospect of covenants or easements to limit land-disturbing activities that would significantly alter the visual quality of the Weaverville Basin.

Another rejected alternative was for the county to support the trade with the understanding that it would participate in the timber harvest review process. There was no consensus for supporting the trade and trusting in SPI to balance public needs with forest and economic management; and there was no consensus for a proposal to establish county forest practice rules for adoption by the State Board of Forestry.

The chairman of the land trade subcommittee, associate county planner Mark Lancaster, said there was general agreement that the BLM goal of consolidating its holdings is appropriate, but the county's input regarding future land trades should be included earlier in the process. He said everyone agreed that the even-age forests around Weaverville are "a tremendous fire hazard and we will see a major stand-replacing fire if some stand management isn't done." However, there was no agreement on the role of commercial logging in forest fuel management. The subcommittee had a preference toward continued management of the lands in the Weaverville Basin for timber and forest uses rather than subdivision into housing parcels.

The Weaverville district manager for Sierra Pacific, Tom Walz, said the timber company wants the proposed land exchange to go forward and hopes the board of supervisors will send a letter to BLM in support of the trade.

He said, "We feel we can manage the land in a manner that does not offend the people of Trinity County. We've logged about 2,500 acres in this basin in the last four years. We can reduce the fire hazards, manage responsibly and have trails through our lands. We can do a better job than the Forest Service can and make the community fire safe. I think SPI ownership would be a benefit in the long run."

Speaking for the BLM, Mike Truden said the subcommittee meetings he attended "were an eye opener, and we realize we need to do a better job of notifying individuals. Most of the issues involve SPI management of the land, but we're not the agency in charge of that." He added that while it is late in the process, a decision has not been made to finalize the exchange and "we will feed the board of supervisors' input into our environmental assess-

ment and make a final decision, but the decision rests with us."

Several subcommittee members shared their views with the supervisors last week. Bill Welsch of Lewiston urged them to remember there are lands around Lewiston and in the Indian Creek area near Douglas City that will be affected by the proposed trade.

He added that while SPI and BLM had agreed the trade is good for them before the public knew about it, the committee tried to determine whether it is good for the public. He said there was very little consensus reached by the group, "and the reasons are important—SPI and BLM had veto power on every issue."

Joseph Bower of Hayfork urged the board of supervisors to oppose the land trade, arguing that "SPI has not done a good job—views and watersheds have been ruined and people all over the county are upset with clear-cuts, herbicides and the slash left behind. People who bought land next to public lands expected there would be management, but that it would be done through a public process—not industrial management they have no say in."

He argued the county should have local forest practice rules adopted by the state because if it supports the current land trade, he believes there will be many others and current state rules are not adequate to protect adjacent properties.

A Douglas City resident, Jerry Hauke, said the proposed trade would give SPI an urban interface area around Weaverville that is probably needed and enable BLM to consolidate its holdings primarily in Shasta County, "but what does Trinity County get? Nothing! You have the opportunity to force BLM to give something back here through covenants. BLM doesn't use pesticides. Why should we settle for less? And why shouldn't BLM pay for fuel reduction—why does the new owner have to?"

Colleen O'Sullivan of Weaverville urged the board to support the proposal from the subcommittee to purchase the land in the Weaverville Basin for a model community forest. Several possible means of paying for it have been discussed, and she argued that at least it would buy three years for people opposed to the trade to find alternatives.

Lillian Godbe of Douglas City said that if the trade goes through, "I know SPI will do a better job than if these discussions had never taken place, but not like if we could create a model, beautiful forest with public access all through the Weaverville Basin. We're talking about the county seat. Take charge and do what you can to see that the land is protected."