



Record Searchlight

Public will win no matter who gets PG&E land

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A land rush is accelerating in the hills of Shasta County.

The Shasta County supervisors last week hired a consultant to help the county try to acquire about 40,000 acres of land that Pacific Gas and Electric Co. is giving away as part of the settlement of its 2003 bankruptcy. That move provoked grumbling from local conservation groups that also covet the land and resent the intrusion.

Before a brawl breaks out, the various parties interested in the land ought to take a deep breath and keep a few facts in mind.

For starters, the whole point of the giveaway is to preserve public access, historical uses, and the wildlife and habitat benefits of the woods and watersheds that PG&E picked up over the years but no longer needs to produce power. A foundation, known as the Stewardship Council, was set up to manage the transfer (which includes 140,000 acres statewide), and it has studied the current uses pretty carefully.

Beginning next year, the council will take proposals from public or private groups interested in conserving the land, but nobody is going to fence off favorite fishing holes and build condos.

Private conservation groups and land trusts, resource conservation districts, Indian tribes, and state and federal agencies are all sizing up the opportunity. Now the county has joined the party, arguing -- high-handedly, some rivals think -- that the land would be best managed by a single entity: namely, the county.

There's some logic here. County Resource Management Director Russ Mull noted that some of the parcels earn money -- from grazing leases, timber and other uses -- and in the long run that cash could pay the cost of managing the rest of the property as parks. Further, the land is supposed to be preserved forever, and it's simpler to keep an eye on property with one owner than if it were split among a dozen groups.

That's true enough as far as it goes. Still, the county isn't in the land-management business. Its bare-bones parks department runs only three sites -- French Gulch Park, Hat Creek Park and the Balls Ferry boat ramp. It doesn't have the expertise to run 40,000 acres worth of forests, rangeland and rivers.

Further, some pieces -- such as land around Lake Britton -- could easily become part of the state parks they adjoin. Other parcels are surrounded by national forest. The Pit River Indians might have a reasonable claim to some of the extensive lands in their historical home. The very active Cow Creek watershed group could be the best steward of 4,000 acres along Cow Creek.

The decision, though, shouldn't be based on empire-building, but the best interest of the public at large.

Whichever names end up on the deeds, nobody is going to get rich holding vast tracts of open space covered by tight conservation easements. If the Stewardship Council does its job, the public will win no matter who wins the land grab.

Redding Record Searchlight Editorial: Public will win no matter who gets PG&E land