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Groups to settle PG&E lands' future

By Tami Abdollah, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
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After three years of work, an array of interest groups are poised to determine the future of more than 140,000 acres of some of California's most ecologically rich and endangered watershed lands, among the largest swaths to be preserved in decades.

At stake are lands owned by Pacific Gas & Electric Co. spread throughout 22 counties in the Sierra Nevada and Upper Cascade mountains that add up to roughly the size of Chicago and include some of the state's prime fishing, hunting and wilderness areas.

The preservation of this acreage is touted as a huge conservation coup. But roughly 40,000 acres are underwater, while at least 65,000 acres are used for logging and agricultural purposes, including grazing. Interspersed are a number of hydropower facilities that will remain in PG&E hands.

"There's not much land that has these kinds of qualities that could be set aside for public use," said Nancy Ryan, a representative of the California Public Utilities Commission on the board of the Stewardship Council, the group deciding the fate of the lands. "Some of the land is really spectacular."

The Stewardship Council is a private nonprofit organization created in 2004 to conserve and dispose of lands belonging to PG&E after the utility's bankruptcy reorganization. In November, the council's board of directors approved a two-volume, 1,106-page, 11-pound, 3.5-inch-thick land conservation plan that outlines the lands, and reaffirms its pledge to conserve or improve them.

"Quite frankly, it's been a labor of love," said Mike Chrisman, California secretary for resources and president of the board.

So far, no land has been handed over to conservation groups or government agencies. Before that can happen, these parties, along with interest groups ranging from off-roaders and anglers to ecologists and gun-club members, will have to reconcile their differences in a process sure to take many years.

"These things are going to have to be worked out on a parcel-by-parcel basis," said Chrisman. "It's a heck of a lot of work."

The size of the land has made keeping track of the plan's complexities a monumental task, even for some regional environmental groups and board members, who represent state and federal agencies, water districts, Indian tribal interests, rural interests, forest and farm groups, conservation organizations, the California Public Utilities Commission and PG&E.

As many as 100 land management plans representing nearly 1,000 lots will have to be created within six years. And all the details of each of these plans will have to be worked out by consensus among all 18 board members.

"You're basically looking at lots of free real estate," said Bill Stewart, a forestry specialist in the cooperative extension at UC Berkeley.

The board has selected four areas to work on first: Kennedy Meadows in Tuolumne County, McArthur Swamp in Shasta County, Bucks Lake in Plumas County and Doyle Springs in Tulare County. It hopes to

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create detailed management plans and legal transfer papers by the end of the year. PG&E, and then the Public Utility Commission, have to sign off on each deal.

Each area presents a set of policy predicaments that the board will have to tackle in another planning unit. For example, Kennedy Meadows is a well-loved recreational area that has a recreational-use packing station; McArthur Swamp, known for its waterfowl and sacred Indian sites, is the entrance to a state park and is used by grazers and hunters; a number of homeowners have lived on the Bucks Lake property for generations; Doyle Springs is adjacent to Sequoia National Forest.

Over the course of the year, the council aims to add six other parcels to the list.

Looming large over the deliberations are questions of which entities can own the land (Indian tribes are still being considered) and how current economic uses such as timber harvesting and grazing will be maintained as the plan prescribes. So far more than 80 nonprofit organizations and government agencies have expressed interest in receiving or managing land. However, board members do not know how they will choose among the groups expressing interest.

And with PG&E no longer paying property taxes on the land, the money owed to the respective counties will have to be furnished either by the new land owners or by the Stewardship Council itself.

"The truth is, when you have to manage land, it costs money," Stewart said.

"Those are real costs, and that's what they're starting to see with these parcels. Some of these are 5,000- to 10,000-acre chunks of forest lands. They're not insignificant parcels, and they're laced with roads and recreation areas. Whoever has these lands [is] going to have to manage them."

The board must ensure that the plans have the flexibility and durability of a constitution.

"A lot of this is going to be quite controversial . . . in essence they saved the hardest part for last," said Pete Bell, vice president of the Foothill Conservancy and member of the steering committee of the California Hydropower Reform Coalition, one of two conservation groups with a seat on the Council.

Board members say it is likely PG&E will keep about half the acreage, including the 40,000 acres that are underwater and acreage that relates to the operation of its hydropower system. There is also a possibility that some of the land will be exchanged in land-swap deals.

Even so, that leaves working timber forests, recreational areas, a packing station and ecologically significant wetlands up for grabs. Much of this land is in the northern part of the state, in the Pit-McCloud River, Cow-Battle Creek and Feather River watersheds.

PG&E nearly auctioned off these same lands about 10 years ago. When the utility entered its bankruptcy proceeding, a variety of interest groups won the perpetual conservation of the PG&E watershed lands.

As part of the settlement, the utilities commission and these conservation groups created the Stewardship Council.

"The benchmark comparison is not so much between how it is today and how it's different after the transfers, but how it is today and how it could have been if the auction happened," Ryan said. "There are not going to be condos built on these places, but there might be a new handicapped restroom; that's what we're talking about."

The council works with a list of six "beneficial public values" it must conserve or enhance: outdoor recreation, sustainable forestry, agriculture, habitat protection, open space preservation and the protection of cultural and historic resources.

"In some places there are going to be trade-offs," Ryan said. "The plan said you can do this for the habitat, and this for the recreation. Now they're going to have to say, 'We're going to have to do the habitat thing and not the recreation thing.' "

tami.abdollah@latimes.com