



The Sacramento Bee

www.sacbee.com

Final edition

May 20, 2007

Land Preservation Plan will be unveiled How to use 140,000 acres of PG&E property in Northern California will be discussed at capital meeting.

By M.S. Enkoji - Bee Staff Writer

A landmark plan to preserve 140,000 acres of Northern California owned by Pacific Gas and Electric Co. will be unveiled tonight in Sacramento.

The public can weigh in on the future of land stretching across 22 counties primarily in the Sierra Nevada and the Cascade Mountains at the first of a series of hearings throughout Northern California.

The utility's property has been permanently preserved as the result of a bankruptcy settlement between PG&E and the Public Utilities Commission.

The Pacific Forest and Watershed Lands Stewardship Council, a private, nonprofit group, was created in 2004 to devise a preservation plan that addressed recreation, wildlife habitat, agriculture and cultural historic values.

Without the settlement that evolved from the utility's bankruptcy reorganization, the land could have been sold to pay off debts, said Bob Finkelstein, executive director for The Utility Reform Network, a nonprofit consumer advocacy group in San Francisco.

"There's always that risk," he said.

At least 70,000 acres will eventually be turned over to nonprofits or public agencies, said Jayne Battey, executive director of the private, nonprofit council.

The rest -- some of it reservoirs crucial to the utility's hydroelectric operations -- will still have reserved conservation areas. Local park and recreation districts, land trusts and state agencies have expressed an interest in the available land, she said.

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Though the utility has offered recreation on portions of the property, it was never its main line of business, said David Sutton, Northern California director for Trust for Public Land, based in San Francisco.

John Moore, a Sacramento volunteer with the Sierra Club, has been following PG&E land use for 10 years.

Though the threat of possible development is gone, Moore said he is disappointed the plan doesn't settle crucial questions, such as who will own the land.

Mike Chrisman, secretary of the California Resources Agency, who also sits on the Stewardship Council, said the plan was developed with extensive input from the public and is a work in progress.

He couldn't say whether any of his departments, such as Parks and Recreation, would be future owners. "That's down the road. We're not at that stage yet."

Tonight's meeting will be at 6 p.m. at Sierra 2 Center for the Arts, Room 10, 2791 24th Street. To view the plan, go to <http://lcp.stewardshipcouncil.org>.