

Statement for the Record

**Bureau of Land Management
Department of the Interior
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks
S. 1596, Gold Hill-Wakamatsu Preservation Act
May 19, 2010**

Thank you for the invitation to present testimony on S. 1596, the Gold Hill-Wakamatsu Preservation Act, which would authorize the Secretary of the Interior to acquire the Gold Hill Ranch from willing sellers using non-federal contributions and appropriated funds to preserve it as a site of historical and cultural value. Preservation of cultural and historical resources is a priority for the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). We support the goals but note that BLM can make this acquisition under its existing authorities, and we would like to work with the sponsor and the Committee to clarify S. 1596.

Background

The Wakamatsu Colony is an early settlement site of great cultural significance to the Japanese-American community. It is the oldest known cultural site in North America associated with Japanese immigration. The colony was founded in 1869 by 20 immigrants from Aizu-Wakamatsu, Japan. These colonists fled Japan during the political upheaval that accompanied the Meiji Restoration. The colonists purchased land at Gold Hill in western El Dorado County, California, and established a tea and silk plantation. The colony operated for two years, after which the land – known as the Gold Hill Ranch – was acquired by its current owners, the Veerkamp family. The Veerkamps now desire to sell the property; however, they recognize its historic and cultural significance and hope to sell it to a governmental entity.

The 272-acre site includes a home from the 1860s that was occupied by the colonists, the mulberry trees they planted, and the grave of Okei Ito. Her grave is thought to be the oldest Japanese immigrant grave in North America. Adjacent to the site is the Gold Trail Elementary School, which since 1980 has maintained a sister-school relationship with Higashiyama Elementary School in Aizu Wakamatsu. The school property hosts a monument dedicated by then-Governor Ronald Reagan that established the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony as California Registered Historical Landmark Number 815.

Several Japanese-American civic and cultural groups and others have written to the BLM to express their support for preservation and restoration of the Wakamatsu Colony site. The Gold Hill region is an historic California gold rush landscape that is urbanizing rapidly, so preservation would prevent the loss of an important pioneering site. Members of that community, including the Japanese American Citizens League, Representative Doris Matsui and California State Assemblyman Alan Nakanishi, are working with the American River Conservancy (a local land trust) to raise the funds needed to purchase the site. Their goal is to establish an endowment that would fund future restoration, interpretive operations, and maintenance of the site. Citing the BLM's highly successful management of other nearby acquired lands, local Japanese-American community organizations and the American River Conservancy are advocating that the BLM take title to the property.

Acquisition of the Gold Hill Ranch would be consistent with the goals of the BLM's Sierra Resource Management Plan. The BLM's nearby Mother Lode Field Office already manages

several acquired properties for their historical and conservation values, including the historic Chung Wah Chinese cemetery about 15 miles to the west of the Ranch, which was donated to BLM by the Chinese-American community in 2007, and the Pine Hill Preserve, a rare plant preserve totaling 4,000 acres across dozens of parcels about 5 miles southwest of the Ranch.

S. 1596

S. 1596 would authorize the Secretary of the Interior, acting through the BLM, to acquire the Gold Hill Ranch from willing sellers using non-federal contributions and appropriated funds to preserve it as a site of historical and cultural value. The BLM supports the goals of the bill, and acknowledges the efforts to date by the private sector to raise funds for the acquisition. BLM notes that it can make the acquisition under its existing authorities, subject to budget priorities and the availability of appropriations. However, this project did not rank high enough in the BLM's annual national ranking process for inclusion in the land acquisition priority lists for the 2010 and 2011 budgets. The legislation is also unclear as to the purposes for which the use of appropriated funds is authorized, and the BLM would like to work with the sponsor and the Committee to clarify this provision.

The bill does not waive a fair market value determination. Therefore an appraisal by the Department of the Interior's Office of Valuation Services would be required before acquisition. Based on the experience of the BLM and American River Conservancy with land values in this area, the \$3,290,000 limit identified in S. 1596 for the cost of acquisition appears to be

reasonable. We would note, however, that it is BLM policy to engage in fair market valuations for its acquisitions, disposals, and exchanges.

We appreciate provisions in section 4(d) that give the Secretary discretion regarding development of a visitor center and direct that private funds or State grants be used to the maximum extent practicable to leverage the cost of constructing the visitor center and conducting restoration activities. This provides an excellent opportunity for expression of community support for preservation and restoration of this site.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in support of the goals of S. 1596, and we look forward to working with the sponsor and the Committee to clarify the legislation.