



U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Central California (CenCal) Resource Advisory Council (RAC) Meeting Minutes

Held at the Mariposa County Government Center in Mariposa, CA
Thursday, June 15, 2023, 9:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

ATTENDEES

RAC: Warren Allsup, Joe Ashley, Laurie Collom, Shaun Crook, Matt Kingsley, Michael Lueders, Reb Monaco, Nancy Muleady-Mecham, Jim Phelan, Andre Sanchez, and Bob Schneider.

BLM: Chris Heppe, District Manager; David Brinsfield, District Fire Management Officer; Philip Oviatt, District Public Affairs Officer; Gabe Garcia, Bakersfield Field Manager; Zachary Ormsby, Central Coast Field Manager; Jeff Horn, Mother Lode Field Manager; Nick Lavrov, Ukiah Field Manager; Sherri Lisius, Bishop Field Manager; Jeromy Caldwell, Bakersfield Assistant Field Manager; Philip Gross, Bishop Assistant Field Manager, Noah Triplett, Mother Lode Outdoor Recreation Planner, Lis Lucas, Mother Lode Realty Specialist; David Greenwood, Mother Lode Outdoor Recreation Planner.

Public Registered: no public attended.

OPENING

Welcome and Introductions:

Philip Oviatt opened the meeting at 9:00 a.m. with a welcome to all the RAC members in attendance. Chris Heppe also welcomed attendees and stated how happy he was that the RAC was finally meeting in person. He acknowledged the great field trip to the Merced Recreation area that the RAC participated in the day before. Philip conducted introductions of all attendees of the meeting. Each attendee was given the opportunity to give a brief introduction of themselves.

GENERAL BUSINESS

RAC Chair, Matt Kingsley asked if anyone had questions about the RAC Meeting Minutes from the February 2023 RAC meeting. No questions. Matt asked for a motion to approve the minutes of the February 2023 RAC Meeting. Joe Ashley made the motion to approve the minutes. Reb Monaco 2nd the motion. All members voted yes to approve the minutes.

RAC BRIEFINGS

Merced River Recreation Area Business Plan Presentation:

Acting Mother Lode Field Manager Jeff Horn gave an overview of the Merced River Recreation Area. He then turned the presentation over to Mother Lode Outdoor Recreation Planner Noah Triplett for the presentation of the Merced River Recreation Area Business Plan. Noah provided an overview of the area and illustrated its location in relation to neighboring

cities (San Francisco, Sacramento, San Jose, Fresno). He specified details of the area along the Merced River and various amenities available within the Merced River Recreation Area.

Noah led a discussion of the development of the Merced Plan under the guides of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act and BLM recreation fee program policy. He illustrated how fees are a way of ensuring that those who actively use recreation opportunities make a greater, but reasonable contribution toward protecting and enhancing those opportunities than those who do not utilize recreational opportunities. Noah explained how expanded amenity fees cover specialized outdoor recreation sites and services including but not limited to developed campgrounds with at least five of the following amenities: tent or trailer spaces, picnic tables, drinking water, access roads, fee collection by an employee or agent of the BLM, reasonable visitor protection, refuse containers, toilet facilities, and simple devices for containing a campfire.

Noah presented the campground fee proposal. He illustrated that the fee is currently set at \$10. The proposal was to raise the fee to \$20 per night. That would include parking for 2 vehicles. There would be an additional fee of \$5 per vehicle to a maximum of four vehicles per site. The plan proposed to raise the group site rate to \$40 per group campsite to include parking for four vehicles. There would be an additional fee of \$5 per vehicle to a maximum of six vehicles per site. The proposed plan would also allow for two additional increases that could be implemented if cost recovery funds fell below 50%. A second fee increase would increase sites to \$25 per campsite and \$45 per group site. A third fee increase, if needed, would increase rates to \$30 per campsite and \$50 per group site.

He presented findings from a fair market value and cost recovery analysis that was conducted to ensure the plan was addressing local conditions. He showed how the analysis was utilized to consider what the costs were to run comparable sites to determine an appropriate rate. The analysis looked at campgrounds administered by the US Forest Service, the National Parks Service, Mariposa County, and privately owned facilities. He highlighted the fact that the \$20 fee proposal is at or below all other fee campgrounds in the area.

Noah conveyed goals of the new fee proposal. Currently, recreational users currently contribute less than 13% toward operating costs. He stated that the goal is for recreational fees to cover 50%-75% of operating costs. This fee modification should increase revenue to within the 50% range.

Noah stated that the plan was to add Recreation.gov as a tool for helping to ensure sustainability by increasing internet visibility and ability to reserve campsites. He explained that Recreation.gov is the reservation system of choice for 13 participating federal agencies that rely on the platform's flexibility to accommodate and enforce the sometimes complex and unique requirements necessary to welcome visitors and support federal land management. He stated that participating agencies are not mandated to use Recreation.gov, but choose to use the system for operational, financial, and visitor management. Agencies often transition to using Recreation.gov because of the value the platform offers in addressing issues related to visitation management, staffing and resourcing, secure financial transactions, and / or the opportunity to deliver facility cost savings and equitable access through an online service. Noah stated that visitors must pay a reservation fee to make a reservation and guarantee a spot for any of the activities available on Recreation.gov site. He explained that this fee is used to fund the program and a portion of the fee reimburses a private contractor for their investment in building and managing this complex technical system.

Noah illustrated how the fee increases would be put back into the recreation area. The monies would go toward additional/replacement of vault toilets, service contracts as needed for site opening procedures, restroom cleaning, garbage collection, septic pumping, and water testing, coverage for cost of staff in the field, replacement of tables, campfire rings, bear boxes and tent pad materials, fuels and vegetation management, trail and road maintenance, minimizing resource damage, and maintain and improve existing environmental education, interpretive information services, signage at the Briceburg Visitors Center.

Noah concluded his presentation by illustrating the steps that the Mother Lode Field Office had completed in the required nine steps of the business plan implementation process. At the conclusion of his presentation, he asked the RAC for approval to the plan and if there were any questions.

RAC DISCUSSION and ACTION:

Philip Oviatt led a Q and A on the proposed fee modification to the Merced Business Plan with RAC members.

Matt Kingsley asked if the \$20 fee included the rec.gov user fee. Noah stated that it was not included. Matt stated that he is in favor of the fee increase and is in favor of a reservation system. Better to pay \$8 and know you have a spot.

Nancy Muleady-Mecham stated that she is opposed to the use of rec.gov. She stated that she supports the fee increase, but cautioned against using rec.gov due to the litigation currently under way involving rec.gov. She is concerned that when you add the user fee to the \$20 proposed fee it will make the cost out of reach for some groups.

Bob Schneider supports the fee increase, but opposes the use of rec.gov. He stated that the sampling is in error because the costs listed did not take into account the user fee from rec.gov. He thought the proposal should have included the fee and stated that the fee would be \$28 dollars, not \$20. He also stated that the site is not user friendly and is challenging for users.

Laurie Collom suggested that we need to wait and see how rec.gov evolves after the litigation is resolved. She likes the use of a reservation system to make it easier for people to go out and recreate and know they will have a spot to camp. She thanked BLM for being the lowest price in the area.

Andre Sanchez stated that the BLM fee will still be reasonable even with the rec.gov fee. He questioned the methodology for calculating the fees in relation to demographics. Jeff Horn stated that the BLM does not keep demographics on campground use. David Greenwood stated that 50% of visitation came from the Central Valley. Noah stated that data was income based.

Laurie Collom stated that page 12 of the business plan clearly describes visitation demographics.

Andre Sanchez asked when the new fees would begin. Noah stated that the date is still to be determined. Andre also asked how the rate for the group site was determined. Noah stated that the fee is double of single fee because the group sites are double the size.

Nancy Muleady-Mecham asked if BLM can put some sites on rec.gov and keep some as first come first serve. Jeff Horn stated that he had explored that option.

Andre Sanchez stated he supports having some on rec.gov and some on first come first serve because not everyone has access to computers or knows how to use app or QRL codes. Noah stated that there will be sites that are first come first serve. Andre asked how BLM was going to determine how many will be first come first serve. Jeff Horn stated they were looking at keeping 10%-15% of sites on a first come first served basis.

Reb Monaco stated that he supports the fee increase, but he has concerns about rec.gov. He said that we all should be in favor of this plan, knowing that things would change for the plan and rec.gov when the litigation is resolved.

Jim Phelan stated that the increase was well justified. He would have liked the increases to start at \$5 but supports the \$10 increase. **Andre Sanchez** also stated that he would have liked to see a more gradual increase but does support the fee increase as proposed.

Shaun Crook stated that he is against fees but does find these fees acceptable and reasonable.

Warren Allsup asked what the local community had to say about the plan. David Greenwood stated that the one comment they received from the community was positive.

Michael Lueders stated that he would prefer to keep fees low and affordable. Asked staff to keep numbers of reserved sites and walk-in sites more balanced.

Bob Schneider stated that they needed to have a deeper discussion on the use of rec.gov. He stated that BLM has the best policy for dispersed camping. However, rec.gov will privatize public lands. He would like to see 20% of sites reserved as first come first serve. He questioned if senior passes would work on rec.gov.

Shaun Crook asked if the field office could make changes to the rec.gov program as needed. Is there flexibility? Jeff Horn stated that if the program was not working, the field office would pull the plug on its use.

Laurie Collom stated that we should leave the use and decisions on rec.gov up to the BLM, not the RAC. Noah stated that the field office would work through the uses of rec.gov within the field office.

Matt Kingsley called for an end to discussions.

Bob Schneider made a motion to split the vote and vote to approve the fee increase but vote no to the use of rec.gov.

Matt Kingsley stated that that was not within the purview of the proposal before the RAC. He suggested that the RAC vote on the plan before them and then make a second advisory motion in regards to rec.gov.

Reb Monaco made a motion to approve the fee increase and ask staff to take into consideration the RAC's concerns about the use of reservation systems.

Jim Phalen 2nd the motion.

Matt Kingsley led a roll call vote during which all RAC members voted in the affirmative. The Merced River Recreation Management Area Business Plan received RAC approval.

Bob Schneider made a motion to direct staff to address concerns over rec.gov and the use of reservation systems.

Matt Kingsley advised that this was an advisory motion only.

Nancy Muleady-Mecham 2nd the motion.

Matt Kingsley led a roll call vote and the motion passed with all RAC voting in the affirmative.

BLM Central California District and Field Office Updates Presentation:

District Manager Chris Heppe spoke about the proposed Public Lands Rule and opportunities to provide public comment. He conveyed the results of the fire preparedness meetings held throughout the district. He gave an overview of the staffing changes within the State Office and the District. He discussed the MOMAC: Utilities Right of Way Consolidation project and its growth among BLM California. He announced to the RAC that the Cosumnes River Preserve had been awarded \$8 million dollars in IRA monies. He announced that Mother Lode Outdoor Recreation Planner David Greenwood had been awarded the National River Management Award for Outstanding Contribution to River Management. He also announced that in recognition of her leadership and public service, BLM California has presented the Ed Hastey Stewardship Award to Pine Hill Preserve Manager Graciela Hinshaw from the Mother Lode Field Office.

District Fire Management Officer David Brinsfield gave an overview of the Central California District Fire Program. He highlighted that the district is well staffed for the season with only 24 vacancies remaining district wide. He echoed Chris's comments about the fire preparedness program and its outcomes showing that the district is in good shape and ready for fire activity.

Bakersfield Field Manager Gabe Garcia briefed participants on the Case Mountain Forest Health Project, Carrizo Plain National Monument and the super bloom of wildflowers that occurred within the monument, the ongoing efforts to establish a Keysville Recreation Area Business Plan, as well as the ongoing oil and gas project/workload.

Bishop Assistant Field Manager Philip Gross highlighted the fuels projects, a conifer removal project as part of the Bi-State Sage Grouse Status and Conservation Plan, the Casa Diablo IV Geothermal Development Project, and the Alabama Hills Management Plan Implementation.

Central Coast Field Manager Zachary Ormsby detailed some of his field highlights including, fuels projects at Fort Ord utilizing sheep, the increased visitation at Williams Hill, the first set of trail work at Cotoni-Coast Dairies California Coastal National Monument nearing completion which will lead to opening the trail system to the public, and the ongoing efforts to re-introduce the Blunt Nose Leopard Lizard to the Panoche Hills area during the area closure.

Acting Mother Lode Field Manager Jeff Horn gave updates on fuels treatment projects at the Pine Hill Preserve, efforts to repair high water damage throughout the field office, increased efforts to educate public about recreating safely around all the high water in the rivers, and updated field office staffing stating that the field office is fully staffed.

Ukiah Field Manager Nick Lavrov detailed the status on projects, including ongoing efforts to finalize a co-stewardship agreement for Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument between BLM and the Tribes, monument planning at Berryessa Snow Mountain with new monument manager in place, South Cow Mountain OHV Implementation Plan, the pausing of the Clear Lake Fuel Break Project (2nd Phase), and the Garcia River Estuary Salmonid Habitat Enhancement project.

RAC DISCUSSION ITEMS: Although no action could be taken, the RAC voiced several areas of concern throughout the district.

Nancy Muleady-Mecham asked Zachary Ormsby about the accessibility of trails in the Panoche Hills area and noted several cultural concerns in the area. Zachary advised that trails are open and accessible, but that the plateau is closed to vehicle traffic as blunt nosed leopard lizard restoration effort. He also agreed to coordinate with Nancy and the archeologists on the cultural concerns.

Bob Schneider asked staff to prepare a presentation about CenCal's Tribal engagements throughout the district. Philip Oviatt stated that he would add this item to a list for future meetings. Bob also asked Ukiah about their Tribal engagement progress in relation to Berryessa Snow Mountain. Nick Lavrov stated that they were in discussion with two tribes, but they had reached out to eleven tribes and ensured Bob that input from all Tribes would be included in the co-stewardship agreement.

Bob Schneider asked Chief Brinsfield for a discussion on PODs – Potential Operational

Delineations. Chief Brinsfield stated that he has been in discussions with Cal Fire and the State Office that has included PODs as part of the fire preparedness review.

Shaun Crook asked Nick Lavrov why Ukiah was pausing the Clear Lake Fuels Project. Nick stated that phase two is on private and wilderness lands. The expense and scope make this phase unfeasible at this time.

Shaun Crook requested staff to give an update on fuels treatment projects throughout the district. Chris Heppie stated that there would be a presentation on fuels treatment methods at the next RAC meeting in September 2023.

Shaun Crook asked what BLM was doing to ensure road access and agency coordination during fire events. Chris Heppie stated that BLM was doing its best to maintain access and coordinate with agencies as this is a very high priority. Chris asked Shaun to let him know if he had specific road access points or agency involvement that had been missed. Shaun stated that he would follow up.

Shaun Crook inquired about BLM policy on the use of vacant grazing allotments. Chris Heppie stated he would look into that and bring that to a future RAC meeting.

Shaun Crook addressed the issue of landlocked parcels within BLM. He asked why is the BLM holding on to parcels that have no access. Chris Heppie stated that the BLM would like to sell parcels that have no access. He stated that he would have staff research to see how many of these parcels exist within the district. Jeff Horn stated that he could work on selling landlocked parcels through an RMP once those parcels had been identified.

Laurie Collom also asked for an update on the district's Tribal engagement efforts stating that the last such update was completed in 2016/2017. Philip Oviatt restated that this item had been added to the list for future presentations.

Laurie Collom inquired about the Range of Light National Park proposal. Staff did not have any information. RAC member Andre Sanchez advised that the park was simply a proposal at this time.

Joe Ashley thanked the BLM for all their hard work and encouraged them to get up the good work.

Andre Sanchez also thanked staff for a great meeting and all their efforts.

Jim Phelan also asked staff for an update on fuels treatment projects and efforts to promote forest health. Chris Heppie stated that at the next RAC meeting, there would be a presentation and tour of fuels treatment products and the Case Mountain Forest Health project.

Jim Phelan inquired why BLM was no longer participating in YSS and similar groups through the forest service as they had done in the past. Chief Brinsfield stated that as fire education and mitigation staff are hired, those individuals would be attending those groups.

Reb Monaco asked Zachary Ormsby about the progress being made to increase access to the Clear Creek OHV area. Zachary stated that they were operating under the current management plan and must adhere to EPA guidance. He stated that they have multiple challenges in that area including road and fence damage as well as staff availability to monitor and patrol the area.

Warren Allsup stated that he had reviewed a report from Mono Lake and was very concerned about the over population of wild horses in the Bishop area. He wanted to know what BLM planned to do about managing the herd. Philip Gross stated that the Bishop Field Office and the Forest Service were working on a plan to address the horses.

Michael Lueders thanked staff for all their hard work and was looking forward to working with Zachary Ormsby on continued efforts at the Clear Creek OHV area.

Matt Kingsley informed staff that he was working to increase fire fighter pay and this remains a top priority for him. He also encouraged staff to continue with the pace and scale of the fuels treatment projects within the district. He thanked Sherri Lisius and the Bishop staff for all their hard work at Alabama Hills. He thanked all staff for a great meeting and for all

the hard work being done in Central California.

NEXT MEETING

Chris Heppie stated that the next in- person meeting for the RAC is scheduled for September 12 and 13, 2023. The location will be Visalia with a field trip to Case Mountain. The meeting will be a blended model of in-person and virtual to accommodate participant needs.

FUTURE MEETING TOPICS AND AREAS OF INTEREST

Based on comments and public input, there appears to be interest in hearing perspectives on Tribal partnerships, the Clear Creek Management area, vacant grazing allotments, selling of landlocked BLM parcels, the use of PODs in fire preparedness programs, fuels treatment projects ongoing and in planning, an in-depth discussion on rec.gov or reservation systems, and the plan to manage the wild horses in the Bishop area.

MEETING ADJOURNED

Matt Kingsley gave closing remarks, thanked everyone for attending, and adjourned the meeting at 12:30 p.m.