



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

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

Held at the Hampton Inn Visalia in Visalia, CA
Wednesday, September 13, 2023, 9:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

ATTENDEES

RAC: Warren Allsup, Joe Ashley, Laurie Collom, Mary Gorden, Matt Kingsley, Michael Lueders, Reb Monaco, Jim Phelan, Andre Sanchez, and Bob Schneider.

BLM: Chris Heppe, District Manager; Philip Oviatt, District Public Affairs Officer; Sarah Mathews, District Project Manager; 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; John Hodge, Bakersfield Associate Field Manager; Jeromy Caldwell, Bakersfield Assistant Field Manager; Burns Brimhall, Mother Lode Fire Technician; Brian Ludt, Bakersfield Outdoor Recreation Planner; Danielle Thomas, Bakersfield Forestry Technician; Zach Day, Bakersfield Archeologist; Ed Fulton, Bakersfield Fuels Technician; Matt Thomas, Bakersfield Supervisory Natural Resource Specialist; KC Craven, Division of Recreation and Visitor Services Advisor; Mark Salansky, Division of Recreation and Visitor Services Advisor; Janelle Smith, Division of Recreation and Visitor Services Advisor.

Public and Registered Attendees: Amy Granat, Gary Ananian, David Witt, James Gorden, Larry Ridenhour, Whit Patterson, Katy Kuhnel, Kristi Bray, David Ballenger, Heather Stone, Andrew Burrows, Miles Gurtler, Kimberly Leitzinger, Jonathan Carvella, Augustine Hernandez, Beni Motenegro

OPENING

Welcome and Introductions:

Philip Oviatt opened the meeting at 9:00 a.m. with a welcome to all the RAC members in attendance. Matt Kingsley led round table introductions of in-person and online attendees. Chris Heppe also welcomed attendees and gave an overview of the state of the district. He highlighted the tour from the previous day and how it was great to have everyone attend that as well. He apologized for the reimbursement glitches that the district was experiencing regarding the travel expenses from the last meeting. Chris mentioned the new Blueprint for the 21st Century Outdoor Recreational plan and efforts underway to collect public comment and continuing work within the district on OHV grants to continue those programs. He discussed the Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funds being utilized within the district and particularly at the Cosumnes River Preserve. He talked about ongoing efforts with oil/gas projects such as orphaned wells restoration, as well as other renewable energy projects. He highlighted that the state recently signed a new statewide Programmatic for streamlining assessment of fuels activities, as well as the successful Fire Preparedness work of fire services. He mentioned the impacts of the extreme wet weather conditions

and the ongoing efforts to repair and restore infrastructure from storm damage. He concluded with a list of all the events happening within the district to celebrate the 30th Anniversary of National Public Lands Day.

GENERAL BUSINESS

RAC Chair, Matt Kingsley asked if anyone had questions about the RAC Meeting Minutes from the June 2023 RAC meeting. Bob Schneider had one change. A motion was made to accept the Meeting Notes with the change. Motion was seconded and all members voted yes to approve the amended minutes.

RAC BRIEFINGS

Central California District Wildland Fire Update:

Mother Lode Fire Technician Burns Brimhall gave an overview of the Central California District Fire Program. He highlighted how the district works with each field office and how they conduct fire work and how the fire program works within the BLM. He explained that fire personnel work through the district, not directly for the field offices. However, fire leadership works closely with each Field Manager at the Field Offices. He provided a status update on how the current Fire Season was going, for this year, there have not been any big fires, *yet*. He stated that most big fires occur between September and October. Burns talked about the only big fires currently active were in Northern California with several above 1,000 acres. 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.

RAC DISCUSSION and ACTION:

Although no ACTION was needed on the presentation, Matt Kingsley led a Q and A on the update with RAC members.

Laurie Collom asked if the BLM had been able to streamline the contracting process for fuels contracts. Burns replied that BLM had started streamlining the process and a draft was already being circulated. He further explained that the goal for IDIQ contracts would be to pre-load the whole state and put out all the bids at once with the aim to get the contractors pre-loaded and ready to go. This streamlined contracting process is tentatively ready to be online in April of 2024.

Matt Kingsley stated his concern of potential for an increase in winter fires due to the wet summer and increased vegetation growth

Bob Schneider asked how the BLM is interacting with the public with planning and strategy early on in the fuels process, namely through the use of PODs. Burns went over the POD system complications and the BLM system. He stated that the BLM would prefer to combine projects together so they do not have to expend resources on several small individual projects.

Recreation.gov Presentation:

Chris Heppe introduced the Recreation.gov group and stated that because of the ask from the RAC, the district had arranged for Recreation.gov leadership to join the RAC meeting in answer to questions from the RAC and the use of the reservation system. KC Craven, Janelle Smith, and Mark Salansky from HQ Recreation.gov gave a presentation about the use of recreation.gov within government agencies.

KC began the presentation with introductions of the team and an overview of their presentation.

Mark discussed the overview of recreation.gov and all fourteen agencies involved with the use of recreation.gov. He also highlighted how rec.gov is part of the current BLM Blueprint for 21st Century Outdoor Recreation plan that is currently accepting public comment.

Janelle went into an in-depth discussion on what and how recreation.gov works and provides public access to the system. She discussed how recreation.gov improves the system and public interaction, how information provided by the public reaches the participating agencies, the full spectrum of services available, and how the service staff provide the information to staff and public. She talked about how the mobile app is constantly being improved and updated with new information. She highlighted that field staff have access to the hub, which allows direct access and communication tools to work directly with visitors and the recreation.gov support team. She explained that the Hub serves to streamline content, provides communication tools, offers online and contact center support, reduces cash handling, provides access to a variety of reports and ensures the system is secure. She gave an example of when emergencies occur in the area and that for safety, the area was going to be temporarily closed that rec.gov assists with notifications to public.

Mark discussed the fee schedule associated with recreation.gov. He highlighted that recreation.gov is a government service that provides recreation management capabilities to participating agencies. The system is managed by an interagency team of federal experts as a public-private partnership with a contractor that provides specially designed software serves to support public land management needs. The services provided by recreation.gov are not funded by Congressional appropriations or agency budgets and rely on the collection of fees to support all aspects of the program. He explained that all fees charged on recreation.gov are set by the participating agencies. Recreation fees are charged for experiences like camping, hiking, rafting, and are generally used to cover expenses for maintenance, staffing, and upkeep of activities and locations. He further explained that participating agencies may also set and charge other fees, including Reservation Fees in connection with reservable activities and locations. Agencies may choose to build these amounts into the Recreation Fee, or they may choose to break them out as a standalone charge in addition to the Recreation Fee.

Janelle went over statistics associated with the use of the recreation.gov system. She highlighted the steady growth in the use of the reservations system through recreation.gov. The largest growth occurred during 2020 and 2021 – even with COVID restrictions and a large number of sites being closed. 2022 saw continued increases in uses and applications with an 11.28% increase from 2021 and 1.1 million reservations in 2022. She then discussed the priority of the customer experience as a core to their operation. She illustrated how recreation.gov is often the first experience people have with public land and water recreation opportunities throughout the United States. As a reservation and trip-planning proxy tool for participating Federal land and water agencies, the recreation.gov team is deeply committed to providing a service that reflects the government's diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible values for all with whom we work and serve. She also explained how the recreation.gov team works closely with participating agencies and the public to provide services to those with varying degrees of mobility and ability.

KC discussed the future of services provided by recreation.gov. The program is looking to digitize the geofence Lottery system for handling those permits. The team is working to provide remote payment systems that would replace the Iron Rangers currently in service. They are working with field offices to implement Scan and Pay systems utilizing QR codes at kiosks located at sites. There is work being done to enhance Venue Reservation Services that will streamline the process, the costs, and the time needed to complete the

process. Finally, he highlighted the new BLM Donation Feature as a means for all of recreation.gov's participating agencies to accept donation.

Janelle concluded the presentation by highlighting that recreation.gov has been in service for 25 years. It is constantly updated and changes depending on the demand by the public and features that the agencies would like to see or use. Recreation.gov tracks alongside all the participating agencies priorities and serves as an excellent example of interagency collaboration and effectiveness.

RAC DISCUSSION and ACTION:

Although no ACTION was needed on the presentation, Matt Kingsley led a Q and A on the presentation with RAC members.

Bob Schneider asked about exclusionary issues with campsite diversity and reservation access to those without digital access, those who have difficulty navigating the system, or navigating the fee payment systems. Janelle Smith responded that they do have a vast call center that provides staff to help those with issues to include helping them navigate the system. KC Craven stated that their research has shown that in many instances, the fees are welcomed by visitors because they are aware that the fees go to maintaining the sites and the systems that are in place. Bob asked for the data and reports that support their findings.

Bob Schneider asked the group to clarify who own the domain site recreation.gov – the contractor or the government. Mark Salansky responded that the government owns the domain recreation.gov. The contractor operates the URL, phonelines, data, etc... according to the terms of the contract. At the end of the term of the current contract, there will be a call for bids and whichever contractor is awarded the next contract, they will utilize the recreation.gov domain and operate under the terms of contract.

Andre Sanchez asked for the group to address the diversity issues with the website. He said that a quick look at the site does not provide any other languages for the website beyond English. Mark Salansky responded that they are currently working on getting the website translated into Spanish and they hope to get it out by the end of the current calendar year. They also hope to expand beyond just these two languages depending on how well the new version is received. KC Craven added that they are expanding this translation capabilities beyond the recreation.gov website.

Andre Sanchez asked about the ability to staff the call centers with multiple language speakers. Mark Salansky stated that they are looking into those options and how to address those issues at the call centers, but that is a different solution than adding languages to the website.

Andre Sanchez asked about how the Scan and Pay systems deal with determining who paid the system and reserved a spot while not overbooking. KC Craven responded that the team is dealing with that as a potential issue and they have detailed instructions for staff as well as coordination with staff at the sites to address those issues as they arise.

Matt Kingsley asked if the team could the name of the agency group next to each symbol so we could all know who the agency partners are. Janelle Smith stated she could accommodate that request.

Bob Schneider asked for clarification on the transparency of the fee system. KC Craven referred to the slide in the presentation that outlined the flow of the fees through the government agencies.

Reb Monaco stated that he had conducted an informal survey of people who use recreation.gov and there seemed to be a concern over a lack of the call center phone number to be in a prominent location on the website. In addition, there seemed to be long

wait times to get through to an agent. Janelle Smith stated that the contact center phone number is provided at the bottom of the page along with documents and URLs. She stated that she understands that the page might be a bit complicated and hard to find. The long wait times might be due to the time of year, but the team is trying to make sure they are adequately staffed and accommodating to peak times. Mark Salansky stated that the team does track the call center numbers and statistics. Over a one-year period, the average waiting time was approximately 4 ½ minutes. However, there are times when the wait times are higher.

Matt Kingsley thanked the recreation.gov team for coming to the meeting and giving their presentation.

Bob Schnieder thanked the staff and the recreation.gov team for providing the information.

Reb Monaco stated he found the presentation very helpful. He hopes to see this continued transparency and opportunities to continue in the future.

Chris Heppe thanked the recreation.gov team for their time, and stated that when the district has another business plan brought before the RAC that this will hopefully lay the groundwork for the development of those plans utilizing the recreation.gov system.

Keysville Recreation Area Management Plan Presentation:

Bakersfield Field Manager Gabe Garcia gave an overview of the Keysville Recreation Area and the purpose of bringing the draft to the RAC for input. He highlighted that the safety issues associated with the area was a focal point of the plan and its goal was to help ensure people are enjoying themselves while recreating within the Keysville Recreation Management Area.

Brian Ludt led the presentation of the proposed plan highlighting the 11,000 acres, 70 miles of OHV routes, two HOV staging areas, and four boat launches. He talked about the principal activities of the area as camping, trail use, river access, cultural discovery, and casual gold prospecting. He discussed the plan's purpose was to establish a framework for on-the-ground actions and recreation opportunities provided and managed within the SRMA through comprehensive management direction and specific management strategies and implementation actions. The need for this plan is to conform to land use plan direction provided by the Bakersfield Resource Management Plan and ensure that the resources and values of public lands within the Keysville SRMA are managed for the benefit, use, and enjoyment of present and future generations.

Brian highlighted that they have entered into consultation and coordination with partners, Tribes, federal agencies, and private landowners. In addition, to date, they have held five public workshops to receive public input on the planning efforts. Through these collaborative efforts, staff identified key recreation opportunities: dispersed and designated camping, infrastructure and facility needs, travel management, interpretation, maintenance, SRPS, casual mining, and fees.

Brian stated that the proposed plan was looking to manage recreation uses in a more developed setting to reduce impacts to other resources and values of the SRMA.

Brian concluded his presentation with a timeline of actions thus far: 201-2019 – pre-scoping workshops were held, an IDT was formed in 2022, expected draft plan and EA for public review will occur in December 2023, and a final plan, FONSI, and decision record occurring in March of 2024.

RAC DISCUSSION and ACTION:

Although no ACTION was needed on the presentation, Matt Kingsley led a Q and A on the presentation with RAC members.

Matt Kingsley inquired about the large number of combined recreational areas. Brian Ludt stated that the goal is to disperse the areas and pull people away from the water's edge and make sure people are not camping shoulder to shoulder.

Jim Phelan asked why we were going to specify capacity numbers and designations. Brian Ludt responded that currently, people will camp wherever they can reach and wherever there is space. This plan will help expand the areas designated for camping.

Laurie Collom asked if current users of the OHV trails have any concerns about the OHV use and proposed campsite locations. Brian stated that they have communicated with the OHV groups and there is not a concern there. The OHV groups naturally separate themselves from the campsites because those are generally closer to the river while the OHV trails are on higher terrain. The current concern is that some trails run through cultural sites. Those trails are proposed to be pulled from the plan. Staff is working with OHV groups to determine alternate trails.

Matt Kingsley asked about accessibility and signage as part of the plan. Brian stated that they are working on updating signs and making sure that bi-lingual signage is utilized. They are going to be seeking public continued public input on signage and other areas such as fees and accessibility as they move forward building the plan.

Andre Sanchez inquired about the timeframe for conducting surveys and moving the plan forward and including public comment. Gabe Garcia stated that surveys were conducted over several summers along with the public scoping workshops. The data from those efforts is available and will be considered in the planning.

Jim Phelan asked if the proposed trails will be multi use trails. Brian stated that staff is looking at that. There are issues with trail designation in the area because of trails that transition onto private lands and other agency lands. The plan is looking to add or designate some trails as non-motorized while looking to setup looped trails for different types of OHV use.

Matt Kingsley stated that the RAC appreciates the preliminary look at the plan and look forward to hearing more about this as it moves forward at a future RAC meeting.

Case Mountain Forest Health Project Presentation:

Bakersfield Field Manager Gabe Garcia introduced the project to the RAC as a continuation of the field tour from the day before.

Bakersfield Forestry Technician Danielle Thomas lead the presentation with an overview of the Case Mountain Extensive Recreation Area. The area is comprised of 18,500 acres of BLM land and 3,000 acres of private land open to non-motorized vehicles (hiking, biking, and equestrian use). The area has historical and precontact cultural resources prevalent. The area contains the only Giant Sequoia grove complex managed by BLM along with six distinct groves on public and private land. In all, there are about 100 Giant Sequoias over 100 inches in diameter, 130 greater than 36 inches in diameter, and another 6,000 smaller Giant Sequoias spread throughout the extensive recreation area.

Danielle discussed the management strategy of the project area. Its focus is to meet future needs through an all-inclusive management approach. This has required revising the Recreation Management Plan and implementing fuels reduction and restoration projects. She stated that prior to work implementation, cultural surveys and inventories of entire work area was completed. As a result, an extensive cultural resources mitigation plan was

implemented.

Danielle provided an overview of the Forest Health Improvement Project that included a CalFire Forest Health Grant to fund the project totaling \$4.5 million. BLM has also partnered with Tulare County Resource Conservation District to help with planning and implementation of the project. Also, private landowner collaboration has allowed for the entire complex to be treated as one project totaling the 1,100 acres of private and public land.

Danielle stated that the project goals remain to protect large legacy Giant Sequoia trees from high intensity wildfires, restore a more diverse and resilient forest structure, and return role of fire to ecosystem. To accomplish these goals, Danielle outlined the project phases and progress on each: Fuels Reduction, Prescribed Pile Burning, Pest Management, and Underburn.

Danielle concluded her presentation with next steps: Fall 2023 additional 240 acres mastication work to be completed, Fall/Winter 2023 ~477 acres pile burning scheduled, Fall 2023 layout and cruise for overstory thinning and begin planning for low intensity under burn after other fuel treatment phases are completed.

RAC DISCUSSION and ACTION:

Although no ACTION was needed on the presentation, Matt Kingsley led a Q and A on the presentation with RAC members.

Jim Phelan asked how many arch sites were on private property and will they be covered in CEQA. Zach Day stated that there are four sites on private land and that BLM is treating them as if they were eligible for NRHP listing and doing strict avoidance and deeming these sites exempt from the project.

Jim Phelan inquired about canopy guidelines and how BLM is addressing issues with specific numbers associated with those guidelines. Danielle stated that BLM is trying to achieve a mosaic effect, while being flexible, as it is hard to put down specific numbers and procedures on paper. Some areas will have high canopy cover remaining after treatment, and some areas will be more open and spread out. Ideally, we would thin the groves out more and have a lower canopy cover remaining to protect the old growth Giant Sequoias from wildfire, and areas that would have higher canopy cover naturally (e.g. riparian areas) would be left with a high canopy cover after treatment.

Andre Sanchez asked if the acreage listed for pile burning was left to be burned or has it been burned and what is the timeline for continued burning given the delays with weather. Danielle stated that the acreage listed for pile burning this coming season is the acreage that has piles remaining that still need to be burned. We are well underway and halfway through the more difficult phase of the work. We are looking at the numbers, but feel that we are proceeding well and should not need much modification to the timelines.

Bob Schneider stated that he really appreciated the before and after photos.

Matt Kingsley observed that the project sounds like a complicated balancing act considering that the public consider the Giant Sequoias to be gems. Well done.

Reb Monaco stated that after he toured this area 10 years ago versus today, he could see the vast changes that had occurred. Although there are many complications, he is encouraged by the forward progress. Danielle responded that it feels we are well on the way of streamlining the process and being able to implement more of these projects elsewhere. She said that BLM has also been participating in the Giant Sequoia Lands

Coalition, the multi-agency action group called together after the recent wildfires to unify a response to protect the giant sequoia groves. She is hopeful this group will help us accomplish more treatments in the future by having access to experts in a range of specialties that would be helpful to plan projects, applying for grants as a group, and accomplishing similar actions across the coalition.

Fuels Treatment Projects Presentation:

Bakersfield Fire Technician Ed Fulton gave a presentation on fuels treatment projects throughout Central California District. He highlighted that fuels treatment projects over the last five-year period has averaged 15,000 acres per year with 60% grazing, 25% prescribed fire, and 15% mechanical treatment.

Ed highlighted challenges facing the program. The district is comprised of both direct protection areas and a non-direct protection areas. The district is geographically expansive which leads to planning challenges. However, he stated that these challenges have provided opportunities for Service First (Interagency Partnerships).

Ed talked about the Bi-State Sage Grouse/Wildland Urban Interface Legal/Regulatory Program that is primarily focused in the Bishop Field Office area where they have employed a mi of defensible space projects and habitat restoration work for the Sage-Grouse and other species.

Ed lead a discussion of activities throughout each field office along with challenges and opportunities found within the various field offices.

Ed outlined the future of Central California District Fuels Program. 1. Uniformity across District Fuels Program Planning: Standardized process for project prioritization, coordination, and implementation. Agency leadership organized mechanisms to implement planned fuels projects, such as; GNA, IDIQ contracting, HVRM PEA, SWFT PEA, and IAAs'. State and District Program managers developing funded fuels positions on Agency T.T.O. to support program area workload. 2. Fostering Partnerships that will Benefit the District and Community: Increased collaboration across the District through Peer-to-Peer training and State office organized training. Agency fuels managers looking for opportunities to plan and implement projects that expand beyond. BLM Jurisdiction through State, Federal, and local interagency relationships. 3. Fire Mit / ED's and Fuels Specialists Teamwork Elements: Linked through Fire Safe Councils, Community Assistance, Project Development and Project Implementation. Project areas are often in WUI and work in conjunction with Cooperator treatment areas.

Ed concluded his presentation with a look ahead at two upcoming large fuels treatments projects within the district: the Yaro Interagency Fuels Project within the Bakersfield Field Office and Cotoni-Coast Diaries National Monument Interagency Fuels Project within the Central Coast Field Office.

RAC DISCUSSION and ACTION:

Although no ACTION was needed on the presentation, Matt Kingsley led a Q and A on the presentation with RAC members.

Matt Kingsley stated that the pace and scale is impressive, and the interagency planning and partnerships is amazing.

Jim Phelan stated that he was glad to hear the mention of continued maintenance on these fuels projects because that is a big issue throughout the state, and he is happy that BLM is staying on top of that.

Andre Sanchez asked if BLM Fire had any interest in utilizing the TRE Prescribe Fire Program in the implementation of future planned prescribed fire programs. Ed stated that BLM would explore utilizing that resource in future planned projects.

RAC DISCUSSION ITEMS:

Although no action could be taken, the RAC had an opportunity to reflect on the state of the district.

Chris Heppe presented Mary Gorden and Warren Allsup with certificates of appreciation for their service on the RAC as they are retiring from the RAC at the end of the year.

Bob Schneider wanted to that the staff for including and responding to the RAC members asks from previous meetings. He felt this made it a reality that their voices are heard and that the staff is key to addressing issues brought forward.

Bob Schneider asked staff to consider renaming Case Mountain to a more appropriate indigenous name that reflects the Tribal influence in the area.

Matt Kingsley asked all RAC members to reflect and bring specific topics to the next meeting. He thanked BLM staff, especially Chris Heppe and Philip Oviatt, for all the coordination and communication that goes into putting the RAC meeting together.

Philip Oviatt gave an update on the RAC Call for Nominations. There will be six vacancies in January 2024. We received six applications and are hopeful to reappoint four current members and welcome two new members in January.

Zachary Ormsby thanked Gabe Garcia for a great set of presentations and stated that he will use this meeting as guidance for the next RAC meeting in Central Coast.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Although no action can be taken on public comment. RAC members welcome input from the public for future consideration.

Amy Granat stated that the Blueprint for 21st Century Outdoor Recreation Plan does not really answer any question and she encourages everyone to go leave comments during the public comment period that is going on until September 30, 2023.

NEXT MEETING

Chris Heppe stated that the next in- person meeting for the RAC is scheduled for Wednesday February 28 and Thursday, February 29, 2024. The location will be Santa Cruz, CA with a field trip to Cotoni Coast Dairies. The meeting will be a blended model of in-person and virtual to accommodate participant needs.

MEETING ADJOURNED

Matt Kingsley gave closing remarks, thanked everyone for attending, and adjourned the meeting at 1:00 p.m.