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Group formed to study Bodie Hills

Friday, 20 June 2008



Greg Low, director of The Nature Conservancy's Northern Sierra and Great Basin Programs, gives a presentation during a meeting Tuesday of the newly-formed Bodie Hills Coordinated Resource Management Planning group, a collaborative of stakeholders with an interest in developing an eco-management plan for the area. Photo by Ken Koerner

By Ken Koerner
Register Staff

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Using scientifically-derived data of past climactic conditions during the Middle Ages, combined with the latest in satellite and computer modeling and statistical technology, the Bureau of Land Management and The Nature Conservancy are exploring paths toward the future ecological health of the Bodie Hills. An approximately 200,000-acre tract of land in Mono County, bounded on the north near State Route 182, on the east by the California-Nevada border, on the south by State Route 167 and on the west by the eastern front of the Sierra Nevada, is being studied by a collaboration of stakeholders identified by the BLM as the Bodie Hills Coordinated Resource Management Planning (CRMP) group.

During a series of three workshops beginning in March and concluding today (June 19) at the BLM's Bishop office, scientists, researchers, conservationists, ranchers, private land owners and agency staff have been studying the historical, current and potential future status of the diverse spectrum of ecological life forms that call this area home.

"On a national basis, the BLM is taking advantage of resources from outside the agency – and soliciting significant input from the public – as we continue to tackle the complexity of managing the millions of acres of lands for which we are responsible," BLM Bishop Field Office Manager Bill Dunkleberger said. "This Bodie Hills CRMP is a classic example of how mutual interests can be brought into the mix to forge mutually-beneficial results for everyone committed to conserving and enjoying our wildlands."

A primary contributor to this effort are staff from The Nature Conservancy. "The BLM approached The Nature Conservancy to assist in the development of computer models reflective of the current status of the ecology of the Bodie Hills area," said Greg Low, director of The Nature Conservancy's Northern Sierra and Great Basin Programs. "We were excited about the potential for the collaborative effort Bill (Dunkleberger) envisioned and were more than willing to generate data and advice on a variety of ecological responses to benefit this unique piece of the American west."

More than simply input and suggestions are being provided by the conservation group, Dunkleberger explained, since The Nature Conservancy is also providing a 30 percent "funding match" for the cost of the CRMP study.

Nearly four dozen various participants have been involved in the CRMP effort during its three planning sessions, each with their own perspective and knowledge about the area to bring to the table.

The vast lands targeted in this study includes significant BLM acreage, private homes and ranches, as well as the Bodie State Historic Park, a California gold-mining ghost town.

Consequently, in addition to land and resource management issues to consider, the CRMP must also incorporate eco-planning with an eye toward mitigating against fire dangers to human habitation and cultural elements.

More than a dozen specific ecological systems are represented amid the flora of the Bodie Hills. This vegetation ranges from alpine plants sprouting among rocky terrain to lower elevation stands of Wyoming Sagebrush growing in sandy soil.

The rigorous nature of this group's efforts is easily seen in the work of The Nature Conservancy Director of Conservation Ecology Louis Provencher, who foraged through evidence collected about drought patterns during the Middle Ages, from 520-1250 A.D., in order to better interpret current and predictable future moisture conditions in this part of the Eastern Sierra. Provencher also included potential climate changes in the decades to come as part of the computer modeling used in evaluating a variety of eco-plans to present at the conclusion of the CRMP process.

The three-day schedule for the CRMP's workshop in Bishop (June 17-19) began with a review of the output from the earlier meetings and was then expected to include "review and refinement" of the computer models developed for the multiple possible approaches to eco-management for the Bodie Hills. The range of action planning is laid out from "no change to current management" to a variety of steps of proactive management, including prescribed burns, mechanical thinning of invasive trees, mowing and attacking the spread of "invasive cheat-grass that competes too successfully against native grass," like Basin Wildrye.

Following the culmination of the study, the BLM will review the various courses of action – and their costs



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– to evaluate the desirability and the efficiency of the different approaches. Meetings will also be held in the future to share the CRMP results with the public and gather its input on the available avenues to protect the ecology of the Bodie Hills. This public input is deemed of primary importance by the agency.

“People appreciate the opportunity to come and participate in an open dialogue on such projects,” BLM Bishop Field Office Vegetation Management Planner Dale Johnson said. “It increases the public’s comprehension of the variety of land management issues our agency must consider. It’s a win-win situation whenever the public has a chance to make their voices heard.”

No dates have yet been set for when these community meetings may be scheduled.

For additional information, contact the BLM Bishop Office at (760) 872-5000.

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< Prev Next >

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