

## Alabama Hills as a National Monument?

Monday, 18 August 2008

By Mike Gervais  
Inyo Register Staff

8-16-2008

LONE PINE – Members of the Alabama Hills Stewardship Group and the Bureau of Land Management have been hard at work in the Alabama Hills, and are hoping that recent efforts could bring federal money for management of the lands and help make the Hills an even more attractive destination for residents and visitors.

One of the things being discussed by the BLM and the Stewardship Group is the possibility of obtaining a federal designation for the Hills, such as a National Monument. “It has always been in the back of our work to find a designation that would work for the Hills,” said Stewardship Group member Chris Langley.

That idea got moved to the front of the group’s work when a photographer from out of the area suggested that Senator Dianne Feinstein make the Alabamas a National Monument.

That request led to a meeting between the Stewardship Group and two staffers from Feinstein’s office, Regional Director-Central California Shelly Abajian and Regional Director James Peterson, earlier this month.

At that meeting, Peterson brought five possibilities for designations that would fit the Hills: a National Monument, due to the area’s unique combination of historic, geologic and scenic values; a National Scenic Area highlighting the Hills’ outstanding scenery; a National Recreation Area because the Alabamas have significant recreational opportunities; and Outstanding Natural Area or a National Conservation Area.

“We kind of talked about it, but we decided to form a sub-committee and discuss it more,” said Langley. Peterson “was very clear that Senator Feinstein won’t do anything the community does not want,” he added, noting that the legislator is not pushing for a designation, but working with the BLM and Stewardship Group to meet their goals for the area.

Giving the Hills a federal designation “would potentially market the area more, and for the BLM it would probably result in some extra funding for the management of the area,” BLM Bishop Field Manager Bill Dunkelberger said.

The group decided to study the options in order to find a designation that would best suit the Hills without impacting current activities in the area, such as motorized travel, filming for movies and commercials, and hiking.

“That is a major concern in the community,” Dunkelberger said, “they think a designation would bring more restrictions.”

And that’s why the Stewardship Group is forming a sub-committee to weigh the pros and cons of each designation.

“In general, the only restriction that is common with all the designations is mineral withdrawals,” Dunkelberger said. That means that a federal designation in the Alabamas would probably result in restrictions against filing new mining claims in the area, but existing claims “would be grandfathered in” and open for use.

“There isn’t a whole lot of mining up there anyway,” said Fifth District Inyo County Supervisor Richard Cervantes, whose district includes the Alabama Hills.

“There is really not a lot of high mineral resources in the Alabamas,” agreed BLM Bishop Field Office Recreation Lead Jim Jennings.



A couple takes a stroll in the Alabama Hills outside of Lone Pine. The Alabama Hills Stewardship Group is currently considering a federal designation, such as a National Monument, that would help generate more money for management of the scenic public lands. Photo by Darcy Ellis

One of the major concerns addressed by the BLM and Stewardship Group was filming in the Hills.

“I don’t think we would support a designation that would prohibit filming in that area,” Dunkelberger said.

The Stewardship Group also said it would not support a designation that would add restrictions to the film industry.

Another major concern about the possibility of creating a federal designation for the area is that federal recognition may draw more visitors to the area to see the beauty of the hills, but Lone Pine may not be able to support them.

“A designation may bring more tourists, but Lone Pine doesn’t really have the infrastructure to support much more tourism,” said Dunkelberger. “And there is not a lot of private land available” to build a stronger infrastructure.

For example, during the recent filming of a major Hollywood motion picture in the Alabamas, many of the cast and crew were required to stay in Bishop, as hotel and motel rooms were full in Lone Pine.

Currently, the Bishop Field Office of the BLM has the Alabama Hills designated as a local Special Recreation Management Area. “But that is an internal designation in the BLM here,” said Jennings, noting that the Bodie Hills fall under the same designation, which holds no sway on a federal level.

Peterson, Feinstein’s staffer, also suggested the alternative of simply adding the existing Alabama Hills Special Recreation Management Area designation to the BLM’s National Landscape Conservation System, which would make it eligible for additional funding for management activities, and not carry any additional restrictions for the land.

Dunkelberger also said that a federal designation in the Hills doesn’t necessarily mean more restrictions on the land. “It really depends on the legislation and the language,” he said.

But others in the Lone Pine community are a little gun shy when it comes to federal designations on public lands. “Everyone knows you don’t get something for nothing,” Cervantes said, adding that it is important for the Stewardship Group, of which he is a member, to thoroughly research the possibilities for designations and work closely with Feinstein’s office if it decides to move forward and draft legislation to designate the Hills.

“The main thing is the community has to be behind this,” Dunkelberger said, noting that Feinstein is not seeking the designation herself, but acting on requests from her constituents.

“The general feeling is that the Stewardship Group wants to proceed very cautiously before they move forward with any federal designation” to ensure that the community can still use the Hills for recreation, said Cervantes.

“We really want to thank the people of Lone Pine for working with us these past couple of years and on this project,” Dunkelberger said, noting that the BLM, as a federal agency, cannot lobby for changes of designations on public lands, and has been involved in the recent talks by invitation of the Alabama Hills Stewardship Group.

The BLM and Stewardship Group are working on two other projects in the Hills, one of which is to pave and clean up the area near the kiosk located at the entrance to the hills. The BLM has contracted with the U.S. Forest Service for that work, as it does not have a road department of its own, and expects to have the job completed by the end of September.

In addition to a new sign that has been erected for the Hills, the improved kiosk area includes a picnic area for visitors as well as advice and tips on how to responsibly enjoy the area, such as keeping to existing roads.

“They’ve done some preliminary work up there, but there was a delay because of the recent fires,” Jennings said.

The clean-up and paving project is being funded by the BLM and is expected to cost somewhere in the neighborhood of \$14,000.

The other project the BLM is working on is a series of “monitoring photos” that will be used as a management tool for future generations.

According to Jennings, monitoring photos are used to document the existing condition of the hills, including roads and trails, and can be used in the future if a dispute comes up about when a new road or trails was created.

“It’s really a good tool,” Dunkelberger said, because the photos “document in time just what is there.”

The monitoring photos project will be an ongoing effort handled by Park Ranger Scott Justham.

Anyone who would like to join the sub-committee that is researching the possible designations for the Alabama Hills is asked to contact Chris Langley at (760) 937-1189 or Kathleen New at (760) 876-4444.