



Supervisors, Forest Service agree to agree to cooperate

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Despite conflicting views on the Forest Service's legal obligation to coordinate with Inyo County, representatives from the federal agency and the county Board of Supervisors made headway on the road to forming a tighter bond when it comes to building a working relationship as neighbors.

The board and Inyo National Forest Supervisor Jim Upchurch expressed different views on the federal agency's obligation to coordinate, but agreed that coordination is the only way to be sure Forest Service operations in Inyo County do not conflict with the county's economic, social and infrastructure goals.

Inyo County is invoking coordination, a federal statute laid out in the National Environmental Policy Act that ensures local governments have a seat at the table when federal agencies do business within its jurisdiction.

"We're willing to meet with you and meet your county regulations, but" the Travel Management Plan "is still a federal decision," Upchurch said.

Upchurch added that, because both the county and the Forest Service are willing to cooperate and coordinate, but have different opinions on what that coordination process requires, the first step is to outline a procedure for coordination meetings.

The county agreed to come up with a procedure for coordination on Forest Service projects at a future meeting. Both agencies plan to take a look at the coordination process that exists between Madera County and the Forest Service to establish a jumping-off point for their own goals of cooperation.

The two agencies agreed, tentatively, to meet every other week to discuss Forest Service projects and actions in Inyo County.

Upchurch also agreed to have Forest Service personnel meet with Board Chair and Third District Supervisor Beverly Brown and First District Supervisor Linda Arcularius to discuss some aspects of the Travel Management Plan that are not public record, such as what routes may be closed due to their proximity to sensitive archeological sites.

The group was scheduled to delve deeper into the Forest Service Travel Management Plan this week, but because the Draft Environmental Impact Report for the project will

not be released until later this month, the bulk of that discussion will be held during a Feb. 3 coordination meeting.

The primary focus of Tuesday's meeting centered around Forest Service land acquisitions and the status of rehabilitation work in the wake of the 2007 Inyo Complex Fire and the 2008 Inyo Complex Flood.

On the Oak Creek restoration front, Upchurch said that a collaborative effort with Inyo County, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and other agencies has led to great progress in the regions damaged by the fire and flood.

Upchurch said the Forest Service has obtained \$366,000 in federal grant money to help with the restoration work, but urged patience as crews continue with repairs in Oak Creek. "It's not going to be all done in one year," Upchurch said.

According to Inyo National Forest Regional Forester Margaret Wood, the Forest Service's short-term goals in Oak Creek include reconstruction of the Baxter Pass Trail, which was almost completely washed away in the flood, cleanup of the Oak Creek Campground and removal of hazardous materials, such as vehicles and other debris, that were washed downstream in the flood.

"At this point we're cleaning up the campground, not reconstructing it," Wood said.

The Forest Service's long-term goal in the flood-damaged area is re-stabilizing the north fork of Oak Creek.

"It is necessary to make the watershed re-stabilization happen," Wood said, adding that "we will likely need more money. The size and scope of that damage – there's going to be a lot of work."

In the spirit of coordination, Second District Supervisor Susan Cash asked Wood and Upchurch what the county can do to help the Forest Service secure funds to conduct work in the Oak Creek area.

"If there is state funding available, you can be an asset," Upchurch said, adding that cooperation between the county and Forest Service on grant applications could prove useful.

Next up on the agenda was a discussion about the Forest Service's plans for land swaps and property acquisitions in Inyo County.

"The only thing in Inyo County we would be looking at would be (LADWP) land to help us with our housing and those types of administrative things," Upchurch said. The Forest Service "is not looking at private property acquisitions at this time. If we were looking at that, we would go to the board first."

One thing the Forest Service is considering is purchasing the LADWP parcel at the intersection of Yanev and Main streets in Bishop where the White Mountain Ranger Station and Interagency Visitor Center is located.

That property, Upchurch said, has been leased by the Forest Service for more than 30 years.

If the Forest Service were to purchase the LADWP land, "that doesn't help the county at all, at least with LADWP we get a little tax," First District Supervisor Linda Arcularius said.

"I'm not interested in pursuing anything (in Inyo County) unless you all support it," Upchurch said of the land acquisition.