

BLM Moves In on the San Pedro

Michael Gregory, *Canyon Echo* (February 1986), pp. 1-2

Confident that they will successfully complete a complicated land trade deal to acquire ownership of 43,000 acres of prime riparian lands along the San Pedro River, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has started asking the public for advice on how to manage this area. Three public meetings were held in January, and comments will be taken until February 28.

The tract of land which the BLM is attempting to acquire lies between Benson and the Mexican border and just east of Sierra Vista. The property forms a long rectangle of land thirty miles long and one to three miles wide, and includes some of the finest remaining riparian wildlife habitat in Arizona. This part of the river corridor also has numerous cultural and paleontological sites.

The San Pedro region contains nationally significant wildlife habitat. According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, 210 species of birds are found in the area, including 20 raptor species; the river corridor is home to one-third of the US population of gray hawks. The mammalian species diversity within the San Pedro river basin here is second only to the montane cloud forest of Costa Rica.

Under the BLM's pending arrangement, the agency will trade 41,000 acres of undeveloped desert just west of the White Tank Mountains near Phoenix to [2] H.B. Bell Investments of Scottsdale, which will purchase the 43,000 acres along the San Pedro from the current owner, Tenneco West.

Also a part of the larger picture is the quiet, but intense, interagency rivalry between the BLM and the Fish and Wildlife Service over which agency should ultimately manage the area. The BLM has already prepared draft legislation to gain Congressional designation as a BLM-administered area for the San Pedro acquisition to kill the opportunity for the area to become a national wildlife refuge. This attention has needlessly injected controversy into this project and has removed attention from the key issues concerning actual on-the-ground management for the San Pedro. The Sierra Club is wary of quickly embracing the concept of BLM riparian area management, until the refuge option is fully explored and a strong management plan for this area is developed.

Conservationists want to make sure that the San Pedro gets the strict protection that this outstanding area deserves. The following points should be made for consideration in the management plan:

Water Quality - mining activities both upstream in Mexico and locally in Arizona pose serious surface and groundwater threats which the management plan should seek to avert.

Water Quantity - adequate water flows in the San Pedro must be maintained to sustain the wildlife values for which the area is being acquired. Designating the San Pedro basin an active management area under Arizona law should be considered as a means to prevent the river from

drying up through diminished groundwater recharge.

Utility Corridors - in particular, the proposed AEPCO transmission line should not be allowed to bisect the San Pedro River corridor.

Access - protection of wildlife habitat and cultural sites should be the primary management concern along the San Pedro. Access for people should be controlled with this in mind, and off-road vehicles should be banned.

Additional Acquisitions - the federal government should attempt to acquire the railroad right-of-way that parallels the river and should attempt to add to this area the uplands to the southwest which serve as a wildlife corridor between the river and the Huachuca Mountains. In addition, an effort should be made to create an international wildlife and historical park on the Mexican side of the border to protect the upper San Pedro drainage and to complement the San Pedro acquisition and the existing Coronado National Memorial.

Consider the National Wildlife Refuge Option - the San Pedro area has long been looked at for designation as a National Wildlife Refuge, which many feel is the appropriate designation for the San Pedro as one of the North America's top wildlife areas. It would serve the interests of this resource and the public best if this option were fully explored as one management possibility.

Please send your comments by February 28 to BLM, San Pedro Planning Team, 425 E. 4th St., Safford, AZ 85546. Also, please send copies of your comments to Gov. Bruce Babbitt, Sen. Dennis DeConcini, and Reps. Mo Udall and Jim Kolbe.