

Experts outline Blue Ridge Berryessa Natural Conservation Area proposal

Contributed by Terre Logsdon
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LOWER LAKE – At a presentation on Saturday, Jan. 19, more than 50 people gathered to learn what a Natural Conservation Area designation would mean to 800,000 acres, which may include a large portion of Lake County.

The Sierra Club Lake Group hosted the town hall at the Brick Hall in Lower Lake.

Victoria Brandon – chair of the Sierra Club Lake Group and board member of Tuleyome, a nonprofit organization that advocates and protects the Cache Creek and Putah Creek regions – introduced two speakers to give an overview of why a Natural Conservation Area designation would be beneficial to Lake County.

The proposed Natural Conservation Area runs from Fairfield and Vacaville in Solano County to the south, west to Middletown, east to Rumsey and along the mountains of the Northshore up into Mendocino National Forest and possibly to include the Snow Mountain Wilderness, although the exact boundaries have not yet been determined.

“I think it’s wonderful, and I support the concept. I hope we can make it happen,” said District 1 Supervisor Ed Robey, who attended the town hall event.

The proposed Natural Conservation Area would include a large portion of Lake County’s District 1.

Bob Schneider, president of Tuleyome, which was instrumental in ensuring that Cache Creek was designated as a California Wild and Scenic River, said the Natural Conservation Area designation would “protect agricultural lands, provide new opportunities for recreation, conservation and stewardship and support the local economies of the adjacent communities.”

A Natural Conservation Area designation, “will have no effect on local jurisdiction or on water rights,” Schneider said.

The public lands in the proposed Natural Conservation Area, according to Dr. Susan Harrison, an expert on botany and serpentine soils with the Department of Environmental Science and Policy, are listed as one of the world’s 25 biodiversity “hot spots.”

Harrison gave an overview of the unique environmental factors – the Mediterranean climate, the topography and soil types – that make designating this area as a Natural Conservation Area critical for conservation.

The designation will not affect private lands within the area unless landowners choose to participate in some way, it will only affect public lands, the speakers explained.

“If we’re going to protect this region,” Schneider said, “We’re going to have to preserve the agricultural heritage,” but private land owner participation is voluntary.

One way a Natural Conservation Area designation can assist private landowners within the the area is by providing conservation easements to ranchers because “ranchers benefit from and play a critical role in sustaining the regional landscape,” Schneider explained and they are, “increasingly jeopardized by development,” in this area.

According to research by the California Department of Finance, the fast growing counties of Yolo, Napa, Lake, Colusa and Solano, which all have lands in the proposed Natural Conservation Area, are expected to grow by 28 percent. That means an increase of 200,000 residents by 2020, which will severely impact the agricultural and wild lands within the proposed Natural Conservation Area according to Tuleyome’s Web site. Schneider told the audience that there would be an economic benefit for the Natural Conservation Area designation because it is a national-level designation and the entire Blue Ridge Berryessa Natural Conservation Area can be promoted as a destination for recreation and tourism.

What a Natural Conservation Area designation does, Schneider explained, is to create a formal name for the geographic area, Congressional recognition of the region, establishes a public advisory committee and will provide funding for multiple agencies (National Forest Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, U. S. Bureau of Reclamation, California Department of Parks and Recreation, County governments) to come together and develop a regional management plan for the public lands.

For more information on the Natural Conservation Area proposal, visit <http://tuleyome.org/projects/campaigns/blueridge/index.html>; to see a slide show of photos taken in the proposed area, visit <http://tuleyome.org/docs/EarthDaySlideshow.swf>.

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