

West Shore Property Up For Sale

Signs Mark Historic Opportunity for Forest Service

by Geoffrey McQuilkin

Purchase vs trade —what’s the difference?

Land trade, land acquisition, land purchase—what’s the difference anyway?

Federal and state agencies often acquire land, but the methods of doing so are a bit more complicated than the average Mono Lake enthusiast experiences when buying a home.

The simple option is a cash purchase from a willing seller. Most of Conway Ranch, for example, in the northwestern corner of the Mono Basin was purchased by Mono County, using grants and other monies to buy the land from the owner and protect it as open space.

But often, lack of cash or a desire to not increase net public land ownership leads to a situation where a land trade is employed. Land trades are much more common than purchases in the Mono Basin and are essentially deals that swap agency and private lands. In a land trade, an agency like the Forest Service takes ownership of one parcel of land and transfers ownership of an equally valued federal parcel at a separate location. In practice, such trades have allowed the Forest Service to make land available adjacent to the town of Mammoth Lakes for schools and other projects, thus concentrating urban development. At the same time, the Forest Service obtains important, environmentally sensitive lands for protection and overall benefit for the general public.

“The Forest Service,” explains Rick Murray, Lands Assistant for the Inyo National Forest, “strives for ‘value-for-value’ exchanges of properties that are determined to be in the best interest of the public.”



Mono Lake visitors noticing the “For Sale” signs near the western edge of the lake this summer may have wondered who was selling what. But few realized the hard work put in by Forest Service staff to pursue a land acquisition opportunity unmatched in the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area’s 18 years of existence.

The Scenic Area covers both public and private property in a management sharing arrangement that has worked remarkably well. With future development pressures in mind, however, the Forest Service is always looking to work with landowners who are interested in trading their land to the agency. This property is such an opportunity.

The real estate signs mark a 120-acre parcel of land that has been owned by the locally famous Cunningham family since early in the last century. The largely undeveloped property includes steep mountain slopes, a small stream that flows through a deep ravine, a small home, and extensive frontage on Highway 395.

Almost three years ago, the Forest Service approached Bill Cunningham to express its interest in involving the property in a land trade should he wish to sell it. The interest was there, and much discussion followed, but working on the terms of a deal fair to all sides has dragged on to the present day. “We really want to see things work out here,” says Cunningham, “but we can’t wait forever for the Forest Service.”

In June, talks stalled due to difficulty reaching a fair value for the property—not surprising given the lack of comparable properties for sale and the limited number of local appraisers certified to work on

federal land trades. By July deadlines were at hand and it looked as if a deal would not be possible; the sale signs went up, and preparations were made to put the property on the open market. Luckily, last minute efforts from Forest Service staff brought in the expertise of the American Land Conservancy, salvaging the talks.

Now, the challenge is to finish working through the complex Forest Service process. Inyo National Forest Supervisor Jeff Bailey has long designated private parcels within the Scenic Area as the top priority for land acquisition—from willing sellers—in the forest, so the deal is getting the attention it needs. The Cunningham family has indicated willingness to accept less than full market value for the property, due to their interest in protecting the land. Land trade experts at the American Land Conservancy are working through the complex details of the deal with both sides. And the Mono Lake Committee is helping to facilitate the trade.

The complication, however, still lies in establishing a fair market value for the property. No large parcels of land have been sold next to Mono Lake in decades, and appraisers are often unfamiliar with the unique private land market in Mono County. Already, the negotiations have gone through two sets of appraisers without establishing a value.

If federal and private appraisers can agree, then the trade will move to completion. It’s no small hurdle, but given the time and effort focused on the acquisition, it’s one that looks surmountable. ❖