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119 A.4 Creative land swap shows big promise

We congratulate the federal Bureau of Land Management and all the other people involved in a creative land swap that promises to enhance and protect wildlife, other natural resources and historic sites along a 30-mile stretch of the San Pedro River.

We hope the promise is fulfilled. The BLM, often criticized and sometimes castigated in its efforts to fulfill a difficult mission, has taken a bold and imaginative step in this venture.

Completion of what the agency said is "perhaps the most significant land exchange involving the Bureau of Land Management in Arizona" was announced March 7 by BLM Arizona Director D. Dean Bibbes.

The site ranges from two to three miles wide from near Hereford northward to near St. David, and totals about 43,400 acres, or 67.8 square miles.

Along that stretch is found perhaps the best broadleaf riparian ecosystem remaining in Arizona, the agency says.

The wildlife includes about 161 species of birds, 80 species of mammals, a dozen kinds of fish and 68 kinds of reptiles and amphibians. There is a cienega, a marsh, that resembles what much of the San Pedro River bottom looked like before mankind began making changes.

There are more than 100 known prehistoric and historic sites and nine known fossil sites, and perhaps more may be found, by appropriately cautious and non-destructive exploration.

The land was owned by Tenneco Inc. The BLM owned 40,895 acres (63.8 square miles) of undeveloped desert land about 15 miles west of Luke Air Force Base in Maricopa County. Independent appraisers set a value of about \$26.5 million on each parcel.

Tenneco wanted to sell its land. It found a buyer, and the BLM stepped in with its plan. Presto! Tenneco sold to White Tank Associates and White Tank Associates then transferred titles with the BLM. White Tank plans to develop a retirement community on the Maricopa County property.

Gov. Bruce Babbitt congratulated Tenneco — and we do likewise — for its patience and readiness to work with public agencies in this regard.

"The placement into public ownership of these lands has been a long-time personal goal of mine," Babbitt said.

U.S. Sen. Dennis DeConcini said, "Through this BLM initiative, a unique area of diverse resources, breathtaking beauty and historic values will be preserved and protected

for Arizonans and all Americans to enjoy for years to come."

U.S. Rep. Jim Kolbe, whose district includes the San Pedro property, said, "The completion of the transaction between the BLM and Arizona White Tank Associates is an important first step in our effort to protect a unique area in southern Arizona that deserves our attention."

In anticipation of the venture, the BLM initiated organization of a steering committee.

Sierra Vista Mayor Jean Randle is a member, as is Cochise County Supervisor Judy Gignac. Others include representatives of: Sens. DeConcini and Barry Goldwater, Congressmen Kolbe, Morris Udall and John McCain, Gov. Babbitt, and the BLM Safford District. The public-at-large is represented by Bill Roe of Tucson.

So, it is done, and the irreplaceable property is in the hands of the public.

But that does not mean — and in this case it should not mean — that members of the public can immediately set forth to walk, ride, camp or whatever upon the land.

In the first place, some of the property is leased for sand and gravel operations and some is leased for cattle grazing through the year 1987, and the BLM intends to honor those leases.

Meanwhile, the BLM needs time to implement an interim plan for multiple usage, possibly including some use by owners of all-terrain vehicles. They, along with other trespassers, already have abused parts of the site.

State officials have indicated interest in developing two state parks along the stretch, one to include the milling ghost town of Fairbanks and the site of the old Spanish presidio at the former Indian village of Quiburi, the other to be near the Highway 90 crossing of the river.

The BLM estimates that completion of a permanent plan will take two years.

Looking at the long term, we believe this venture, this 43,400 acres, can be an enormous asset to the people of the entire area surrounding it; an attraction to tourists, to photographers, to painters — and a place to visit quietly, to pause, to rest, to reflect.

Over the months and the years, the names and faces at the BLM and on the steering committee will change. We hope the goal will not.

There is an underlying challenge, an unanswered question, that remains:

What agency, what mechanism, will ensure the enhancement and protection of the quality of the San Pedro River itself as it flows into this protected place?