

Bill would auction 14,000 acres

LAS VEGAS (AP) — A proposal that could raise \$40 million to buy environmentally sensitive land in Nevada has been endorsed by the federal government and appears set for smooth sailing in Congress, its backers say.

Michael Dwyer, district manager for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, voiced support Tuesday for legislation that would sell 14,000 acres of BLM land in Las Vegas to the highest bidder. The agency will use the money to buy pristine land in Nevada and to build hiking trails and other improvements at the Lake Mead National Recreation Area, the Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area and elsewhere.

"We like it," Dwyer said at a public lands task force meeting. "It allows us to try to retain environmental benefits for southern Nevada."

The measure is a reworked version of legislation that failed in Congress during the session that ended in October.

But the sponsors, Rep. John Ensign, R-Nev., and Sen. Richard Bryan, D-Nev., say it stands a better chance next year. The reason is that a formula for dividing money from land sales has been changed.

Also, a provision that would have given money to Utah for desert tortoise habitat was removed after objections from Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev.

Last year's version would have split the proceeds evenly between the State of Nevada and the federal government. The new version, which will be introduced in the House and Senate after Congress convenes next month, gives the federal government 85 percent.

All of the money, which could exceed \$40 million, will stay in-state,

said Brent Heberlee, Bryan's legislative assistant. The federal portion will buy sensitive land throughout the state, particularly in southern Nevada.

Of the state's share, 10 percent is being set aside to address the Las Vegas Valley's water needs, and the other 5 percent will boost education funding.

The bill created hard feelings last year after Ensign accused Reid of killing it to undermine Ensign's reelection. Political observers have speculated that Ensign may challenge Reid in 1998. Reid said he objected to money going to Utah for desert tortoise habitat. With that no longer a factor, Reid supports the bill.

A12 ELKO DAILY FREE PRESS, Elko, Nevada Tuesday, May 18, 1999

BLM sales would buy easements

MINDEN (AP) — A plan to protect agricultural land in Douglas County has received a formal go-ahead from federal officials.

Tom Fry, acting director of the Bureau of Land Management in Washington, D.C., approved a feasibility report detailing the Rural Lands Initiative on Friday.

"We can move forward. It's good news," said John Singlaub, BLM district manager in Carson City. "Now the hard work begins."

Singlaub and other supporters have anxiously awaited the BLM's approval of the feasibility report — a key hurdle before the initiative's implementation can proceed.

Under the plan, BLM will sell more than 16,300 acres of property in southern Nevada's Lincoln County to allow residential and commercial development in a place where the federal government owns virtually all of the land.

Money raised would pay for agricultural easements protecting Douglas County's farms and ranches. Ranchers would keep ownership of their land and precious water rights, but residential or commercial development of their property would be prohibited forever.

"It's wonderful news," said Ame Hellman of the American Land Conservancy, another key supporter of the program.

Friday's approval still represents a sort of starting point, Singlaub said. The BLM must now proceed with environmental studies and property appraisals, a process he said could take roughly 18 months.

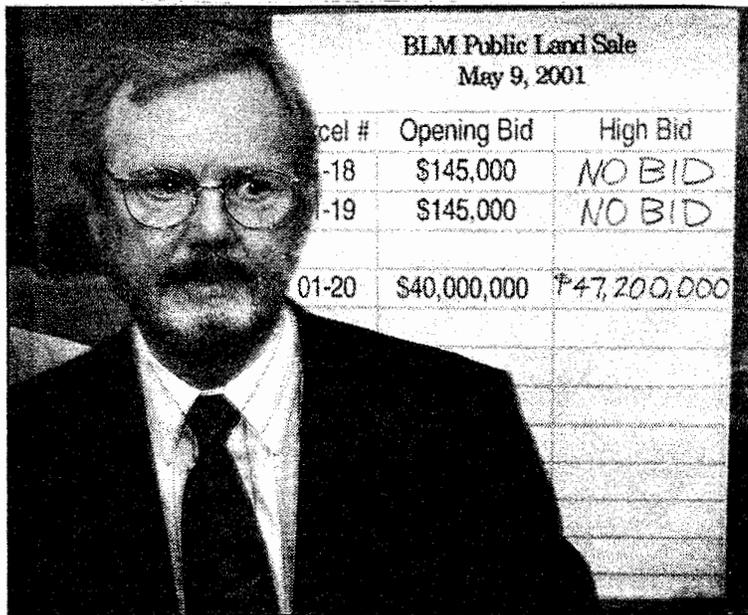
Hellman is hopeful the process can proceed quickly because development pressure in the Carson Valley is increasing.

"The pressure is on for moving forward," Hellman said. "Time is of the essence. We're seeing larger ranches breaking up. We're losing resources."

Developers in Lincoln County hoping to build on public land that will be sold privately under the plan were also beginning to lose interest, Hellman said.

Kathy Hussman, a member of one of four Carson Valley ranching families hoping to protect their land with agricultural easements, praised BLM's approval of the plan.

"We are ecstatic," Hussman said. "That really means they believe in the exchange."



(Associated Press)

Las Vegas attorney Frank Schreck walks past a bid board showing his winning bid of \$47.2 million for a large Bureau of Land Management parcel in North Las Vegas on Wednesday at the Clark County Government Center in Las Vegas. American Nevada Corporation of Henderson and Phoenix-based Del Webb Corporation outbid four other developers to buy 1,905 acres of public land for \$47.2 million.

BLM land in Vegas area sells for \$47.2 million

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Two of the largest residential developers in Las Vegas were the high bidders Wednesday on the most expensive piece of Bureau of Land Management property sold in the agency's history.

"This is the highest value of land that the BLM has ever sold at any given time," said Phillip Guerrero, BLM spokesman.

American Nevada Corp. of Henderson and Phoenix-based Del Webb Corp. out bid four other major developers to purchase 1,905 acres of public land in North Las Vegas for \$47.2 million. The price per acre was \$24,776.

Bidding started at \$40 million. The second highest bidder was retail developer Olympia Group.

American Nevada developed large tracts in the area east of Las Vegas, including Green Valley, Green Valley Ranch and the upscale Seven Hills master-planned community. Retirement community pioneer Del Webb developed Anthem and Sun City Summerlin, among others.

Of the 1,905 acres sold, 1,200 is developable. The remaining 705 will be used for roads, schools, parks and fire stations.

"We've always been interested in getting the property, now we've got a lot of work to do with the city," said Phil Peckman, the chief

operating officer for the Greenspun Corp., which owns American Nevada.

Peckman added that the \$47.2 million price tag was high.

"It was difficult to start with \$40 million, that was a stretch in itself," he said, in part, he said because only 1,200 acres can be developed.

In comparison, Guerrero said the appraised value of 5,000 acres the bureau sold to Del Webb two years ago was about \$35 million.

The new property owners have 30 days to reach an agreement with the city of North Las Vegas on how to develop the property.

American Nevada will act as managing partner, and Del Webb will supply its expertise in producing age-qualified communities. The partners said other homebuilders would be invited to develop tracts of the property, but it is too early to determine how many houses could be built.

Michigan-based Pulte Homes announced earlier this month that it is buying Del Webb, which would make Pulte the nation's largest homebuilder.

To compete in the bidding process, the companies had to demonstrate the ability to invest tens of millions of dollars for infrastructure, including roads, sewers and water systems.