

Statement for the Record
Bureau of Land Management
Department of the Interior
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks
S. 177, Gold Hill-Wakamatsu Preservation Act
May 11, 2011

Thank you for the invitation to present testimony on S. 177, the Gold Hill-Wakamatsu Preservation Act, which would authorize the Secretary of the Interior to acquire the Gold Hill Ranch—by donation, exchange, or purchase from a willing seller with donated or appropriated funds—to preserve it as a site of historical and cultural value. Preservation of cultural and historical resources is a priority for the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The BLM supports the goals of the bill but notes that BLM can make this acquisition under its existing authorities, and we would like to work with the sponsor and the Committee to clarify S. 177.

Background

The Wakamatsu Colony is an early settlement site of great cultural significance to the Japanese-American community. It is the oldest known cultural site in North America associated with Japanese immigration. The colony was founded in 1869 by twenty immigrants from Aizu-Wakamatsu, Japan. These colonists fled Japan during the political upheaval that accompanied the Meiji Restoration. The colonists purchased land at Gold Hill in western El Dorado County, California, and established a tea and silk plantation. The colony operated for 2 years, after which the land—known as the Gold Hill Ranch—was acquired by the Veerkamp family in 1871. The Veerkamps recognized its historic and cultural significance and in 2010 sold the property to the American River Conservancy (Conservancy), a local land trust. The Conservancy would like to transfer ownership of the property to a government entity for long-term preservation of the site.

The 272-acre site includes a home from the 1860s that was occupied by the colonists, the mulberry trees they planted, and the grave of Okei Ito. Her grave is thought to be the oldest grave of a Japanese immigrant in North America. Adjacent to the site is the Gold Trail Elementary School, which since 1980 has maintained a sister-school relationship with Higashiyama Elementary School in Aizu Wakamatsu. The school property hosts a monument dedicated by then-Governor Ronald Reagan that established the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony as California Registered Historical Landmark Number 815.

Several Japanese-American civic and cultural groups and others have written to the BLM to express their support for preservation and restoration of the Wakamatsu Colony site. The Gold Hill region is an historic California gold rush landscape that is urbanizing rapidly, and this legislation could prevent the loss of an important pioneering site. Members of that community, including the Japanese American Citizens League, U.S. Representative Doris Matsui, and California State Assemblyman Alan Nakanishi, worked with the Conservancy to raise the funds needed to purchase the site. Their goal is to establish an endowment that would fund future restoration, interpretive operations, and maintenance of the site. Citing the BLM's highly

successful management of other nearby acquired lands, local Japanese-American community organizations and the Conservancy are advocating that the BLM take title to the property.

Acquisition of the Gold Hill Ranch would be consistent with the goals of the BLM's Sierra Resource Management Plan. The BLM's nearby Mother Lode Field Office already manages several acquired properties for their historical and conservation values, including the historic Chung Wah Chinese cemetery about 15 miles to the west of the Ranch, which was donated to the BLM by the Chinese-American community in 2007, and the Pine Hill Preserve, a rare plant preserve totaling 4,000 acres across dozens of parcels about 5 miles southwest of the Ranch.

S. 177

S. 177 would authorize the Secretary of the Interior, acting through the BLM, to acquire the Gold Hill Ranch—by donation, exchange, or purchase from a willing seller with donated or appropriated funds—to preserve it as a site of historical and cultural value. The BLM supports the goals of the bill and acknowledges the efforts to date by the private sector to raise funds for the acquisition and long-term maintenance of the property. The BLM notes that it can make the acquisition under its existing authorities, subject to budget priorities and the availability of appropriations. However, this project was not included in the land acquisition priority lists for the 2011 and 2012 budgets.

The legislation gives the Secretary discretion to enter into a cooperative agreement with public or nonprofit entities to interpret the history of the site and related pioneer history. The bill also provides that the cooperative agreement may include provisions for the design and development of a visitor center. The cooperative agreement provides an excellent opportunity for further expression of community support for preservation and restoration of this historic site.

The BLM would like to work with the sponsor and the Committee to clarify the purposes for which the BLM would be authorized to expend appropriated funds.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in support of the goals of S. 177.