

# The Daily



# Triplicate

Saturday  
June 6, 2009

Informing the community since 1879

Del Norte County, Calif

## IN FOCUS: HURDYGURDY CREEK LAND DEAL



The Daily Triplicate/Bryant Anderson

Grant Werschull of the Smith River Alliance points to Hurdygurdy Creek on a map of the National Recreation Area.



# Del Norte's final frontier?

## Acquisition sought to preserve habitat on Smith tributary

By Nicholas Grube

Triplicate staff writer

Drive along any of the U.S. Forest Service roads surrounding the Hurdygurdy Creek watershed and you might think you're in just another remote section of the Smith River National Recreation Area.

It's a mixed coniferous forest, covered in Douglas fir, knob cone pine, tan oak and madrone, among many other species of tree that are prevalent in the area.

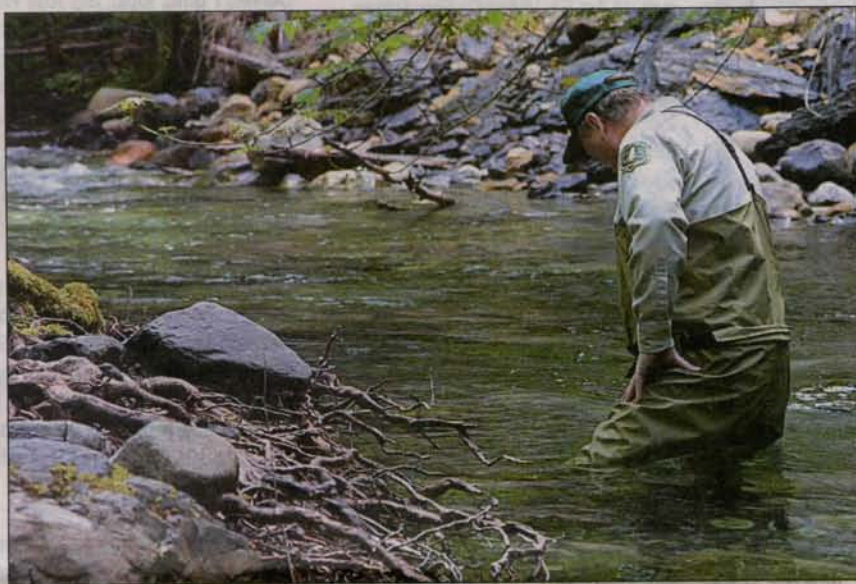
But look at a map of the nearly 370,000-acre NRA and you'll notice a large white hole located in the center of its green boundaries, indicating that more than 5,400 acres around Hurdygurdy Creek are not part of the federal land base, and, in fact, are privately owned.

"In terms of the National Recreation Area, this is the last remaining large private inholding," Smith River Alliance Executive Director Grant Werschull said. "That's evident just by looking at the map."

His agency, a non-profit that works to protect and restore natural resources in and around the Smith River watershed, wants to change this by buying the property from its Washington state-based owner, ALCO Holdings, LLC, and then transferring it to the U.S. Forest Service for inclusion in the NRA.

Public ownership, Werschull said, would not only assure conservation of an important salmon and steelhead spawning tributary, but would also allow the federal government access to the property to work on timber stand improvements to reduce wildfire threats to the communities of Big Flat and Rock Creek.

"The National Recreation Area is that model for sustainable management, and it's not just timber, it's wildlife and water," Werschull said. "By buying this property, we're investing in the community and making that watershed healthy."



The Daily Triplicate/Bryant Anderson

Mike McCain, a fisheries biologist for the U.S. Forest Service searches Hurdygurdy Creek for the remnants of salmon and steelhead nests that the fish created during the spawning season.

### INSIDE

■ See Page B1 for more images of Hurdygurdy Creek

Negotiations between the Smith River Alliance and ALCO are already under way, and should they reach a final agreement, the Hurdygurdy Creek acquisition would likely be the final large-scale private-to-public land procurement in Del Norte County.

"All the major inholdings will have been secured," Werschull said. "I'm unaware of any other major acquisitions that are being talked about or even thought about."

### County seeks compensation

These major land deals are not without controversy. Some local leaders criticize such acquisitions because they say it takes land off the tax rolls and limits how the property can be used. They also say there needs to be some sort of mitigation to offset the loss, either through a land trade or cash payment.

After the county Board of Supervisors learned that \$1 million was in the federal budget for the acquisition of Hurdygurdy Creek, it voted last

month to send a letter to U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein informing her of the county's policy to have "no net loss" of private lands without compensation.

That letter — not the first supervisors have written to the senator about this issue — notes that more than 75 percent of Del Norte County is publicly owned, and that any additional loss of private lands could have significant local impacts.

"The Board of Supervisors of the County of Del Norte opposes public dollars expended for private sales of land within our local land use authority without our input or support," the letter states. "We would appreciate your active assistance in facilitating negotiations between the private timberland owner, the Forest Service, and the County on a resolution to this proposed sale, including adequate mitigation to the County if a sale is to occur."

The supervisors can't enforce their "no net loss" policy — they really have no mechanism to do so — but the Smith River Alliance and ALCO Holdings would like to get full support for their project.

Darrin Kasteler, vice-president of ALCO Holdings, said the county's stance has been a "major hindrance" on any sort of deal and it has created a

■ See HURDYGURDY, A10



# Hurdygurdy

(Continued from Page A1)

"hotbed of politics" that no one, especially a federal agency, wants to be involved in.

But he also said there have been a number of conversations with the county about the acquisition and the idea that his company would provide mitigation.

"We're very good to the communities we're in," Kasteler said. "We're a family run organization and we're not some greedy corporate chain."

One of the biggest concerns for the supervisors is that moving Hurdygurdy Creek into public ownership would reduce their property tax revenues.

Kasteler said his company pays about \$4,000 a year in property taxes, and it has already offered to cover that lost revenue, and then some, through mitigation. Though no real numbers have been thrown on the table, he said county officials "wanted something more meaningful than that."

"They're in a tough spot. I totally sympathize with where they're coming from," Kasteler said of the supervisors. "But let's do it as partners so we can create a win-win scenario here."

## Not suitable for timber

ALCO Holdings is a family-owned company based in Centralia, Wash., that deals mainly in timber. It has owned the Hurdygurdy Creek property since the 1950s, and was doing business

as the Agnew Company, which at the time had mills in locations as far south as Klamath and all the way up to central Washington.

The last time Hurdygurdy was logged was in the late 1950s. Kasteler said it hasn't been cut since then due to naturally poor soil conditions and difficult terrain that made timber reproduction arduous.

In order for a tree to get to a size where it's "worthwhile" to harvest, Kasteler said it should be at least 30 inches in diameter at the base and about 120 feet tall. On ALCO properties in Washington, trees grow to that size in about 50 years, he said, but in Hurdygurdy it takes almost twice that amount of time.

"We're in the business of harvesting timber, just like a farmer," Kasteler said. "Since that property doesn't perform, then there's no reason for us to own it."

ALCO Holdings has tried to find other timber companies to buy the Hurdygurdy Creek property, but so far hasn't had any luck. Instead, the business decided to work on a sale with the Smith River Alliance.

"In this case we're trying to get that land into its best use, which is clearly not as a timber production forest," Kasteler said. "And it's not single-family homes, and it's not shopping malls. It's a Smith River tributary for recreational activities."

## Bolstering spawning habitat

Hurdygurdy Creek is one of the largest tributaries on the South Fork of the Smith River.

Its importance as a spawning habitat for a number of fish species, including steelhead, cutthroat trout, chinook and coho salmon — which is listed as a threatened species — is well documented by both the U.S. Forest Service and the California Department of Fish and Game.

On a recent nest-counting excursion into a section of Hurdygurdy Creek that is in the NRA, U.S. Forest Service fisheries biologist Mike McCain noted the importance of protecting the rest of the waterway to help bolster a Pacific fishery that has struggled recently, especially given the closures of the commercial salmon fisheries over the past couple of years.

"It's a good investment," McCain said. "Hurdygurdy Creek is part of the single biggest tributary spawning area in the Smith River."

Some habitat restoration work has already been done on the lower portion of the creek, he said, and last year more than 300 salmon and steelhead nests were found in that area alone. With the rest of Hurdygurdy turned over to the public trust, officials would be able to go farther upstream and continue to restore the spawning habitat, he said.

"It's doing the work to ensure the future of this creek and the fisheries," McCain said.

## More of a fire buffer

ALCO's Hurdygurdy Creek property is also important in protecting two of Del Norte County's most isolated communities from wildfires. The land is northeast of Big Flat and Rock Creek — meaning winds from that direction could easily push a fire that way in a hurry — and there has been no management on the property as far as fuel reduction or timber stand improvements since the property was last logged.

Because of this, it's considered a top priority for fuel reduction under the Del Norte Fire Safe Plan. Cal Fire Battalion Chief Jim Smith said it's especially important to do some thinning in the Hurdygurdy Creek area because of its vicinity to Big Flat and Rock Creek, and because its remote location makes it difficult to respond quickly.

"If we had a lightning fire out there on the property, of course the fire can grow to a large size

under the heavy untreated fuels," Smith said. "Anything we get out of there in the landscape would be favorable to successful fire management and control."

Since Hurdygurdy Creek has been under private ownership, and therefore off-limits to the public, wildfire fuels have been allowed to build up over the years. If it reverts to U.S. Forest Service control, Smith River NRA District Ranger Mary Kay Vandiver said work crews can start to manage the land properly.

"If it was in the public trust we would be able to do the timber stand improvements that we need to do in that area," Vandiver said. "The Forest Service would have the opportunity to do active forest management, timber stand improvements and reduce the fuel loads."

With the governor threatening to close most state parks, including all of them in Del Norte County, the NRA could become a bigger recreational attraction for visitors and locals alike.

The addition of Hurdygurdy Creek would add nearly 5,400 more acres to the federal land base, and officials say the intention would be to further expand recreational activities if the acquisition goes through.

"The benefit for the public would be that they would have access to 5,000 acres of national forest land," Vandiver said. "When you put it into the public trust, everybody owns it."

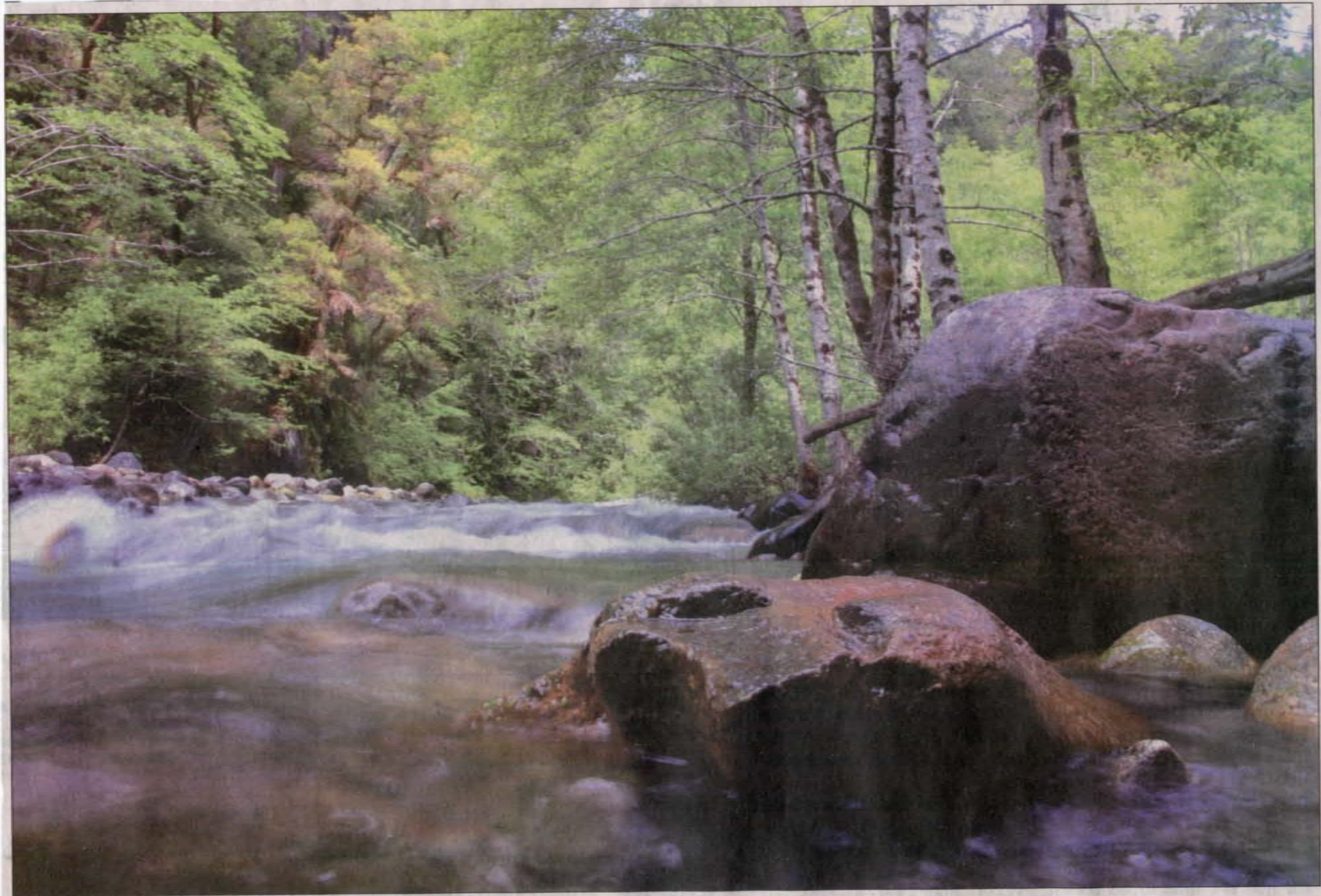
It still might take another year or two for the Hurdygurdy land deal to go through. The Smith River Alliance estimates it will cost about \$4.5 million for the complete acquisition, and right now it only has the \$1 million from the federal government's allocation in the upcoming budget. If full funding isn't achieved this year, then Werschull said the purchase could be phased in over the next two years.

And there's still the matter of getting the support of the Del Norte County Board of Supervisors, something Werschull said is important to the acquisition's success.

"It does take longer, and it can test your patience, but I think it's worth it," Werschull said. "The better we can get at being cooperative, that's where our power is as a community."

Reach Nicholas Grube at [ngrube@triplicate.com](mailto:ngrube@triplicate.com)





**IMAGES of HURDYGURDY:** Triplicate photographer Bryant Anderson captured these shots Wednesday of the Hurdygurdy Creek area in eastern Del Norte County, which is proposed for public acquisition, and Grant Werschull of the Smith River Alliance.



