

Sierra and Sequoia National Forests Plan Revision Objection

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Objection Reviewing Officer, Deputy Regional Forester Elizabeth Berger, USDA Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region, 1323 Club Drive, Vallejo, CA 94592

This is a descriptive objection to the management area as it passes through the Piutes, and why we object to the PCT ‘management area’ specifically in each area.

Objection to the PCT management area

The PCT management area bisects a natural roaded area and a general recreation area from the southern end of the Sequoia national forest northbound along Jawbone Cyn Rd until crossing Piute Mtn Rd. Soon after, the PCT turns eastward crossing 29S05, the road that leads to Landers Campground.

We object to the management area since the trails that cross the PCT at this southern end of the forest are not designated, generally cross the PCT perpendicular, and lead out of sight. These trails, stuck in an ‘on hold’ Piute Travel Management Plan, should have been designated by late 2011. The trails serve movement westbound through the forest with high value scenic opportunities of the Walker Basin. See figure 1 Map from USFS website. We don’t think user conflict or denigration of the PCT trail experience is an issue here.

Where the PCT approaches Piute Mtn Rd., close to the west is a large block of private property, originally incorporated as the town of Claraville in the 1800’s. A management area that extends into the block of property has the potential to infringe on basic property rights. There is more private property just south of Piute Mtn Rd and to the east of the block of land known as Claraville that is closer to the PCT. We object since the PCT land acquisition Inventory is not available to the landowners and the Optimal Location Reviews are poorly understood or described, nor do we know where the optimal trail locations for future trail routing exists. See figure 2.

In multiple parts of USFS documents where the PCT is discussed, strategies include discussion of purchase of lands in a PCT land acquisition inventory. The USFS says the inventory rests with the PCTA, therefore they cannot share it with us. The PCTA does not make the inventory accessible on its website. The USFS documents discuss at some length the relocation of the PCT to higher value areas but does not elucidate on the process. The process appears to be best understood from March 2012 Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail Optimal Location Review Process Guidelines. The general ambiguity of future trail tread contributes considerable uncertainty to the security of property ownership. Without clearly designated roads, routes, and trails, and the recognition of the existing non system routes, ingress and egress, along with accessibility to the wider forest of public lands may be cut off, and therefore is a major concern and reason to object to a management area that some would like to extend as a viewshed as far as the eye can see.

When the PCT is north of Piute Mtn Rd. and bending east crossing 29S05, it is close to Landers Campground. The site is not developed with hookups or other amenities but is high value to all users since there is always water available. This campground is popular with PCT hikers, hunters, general campers, gem seekers, and off roaders, and the site known as ‘the Landers Meadow Guard Station’. The spot is not much more than a stack of rocks presently, making a semi structure. Because of the long history of gold mining, logging, and cattle grazing, this area is loaded with roads, routes, and trails of a historic nature. While there is an abundance of such and within a proposed management area, we do not believe any of this contributes to the denigration or comprises any loss of value to the PCT experience. The ArcGIS web map does not show what we are talking about so we have submitted Figures 3 and 4, which are pdf files from the USFS of this area in 2004 shortly after trail inventory was taken. Some of the non system routes are single track trails usually used by off roaders, but many of the other non system routes are the size of roads. This particular area has had many uses for over 100 years.

And yet, there is no conflict of users or stakeholders. There have been allegations leveled but never confirmed. A Kern County Sheriff investigation of misuse of the PCT showed no such issue. Enforcing a management area a mile wide in this generally flatter terrain has the potential to create conflict as we see it. We think it counterproductive to foster conditions of discord when we enjoy the current harmony and this is a major reason we object to the creation of a PCT management area.

Staff has told us that this plan only concerns the USFS, but your documents have many references to working with other agencies and partners. MOU’s exist to facilitate the needs of the PCT. Your revised documents frequently cite the value of the trail experience. The PCTA is looking for a great trail experience. Does that stop once outside of USFS lands? Generally, BLM lands don’t look like USFS lands, but here it is indistinguishable. Figure 4 shows the PCT (purple line) stopping at the border with BLM lands. Note that the purple line stops; it is the current placement of the PCT. A close look of the map shows the PCT national scenic trail to the south in red, and where it may have been at one time. What is accurate is where the PCT crosses Piute Mtn Rd. to descend the mountain, with Mount Whitney in the background on a clear day. Looking to the west in the corner of the BLM lands and on both sides of Piute Mtn Rd is private property. Here the PCT management area would clearly extend into that property and it is here that people access our public lands by means of routes and trails shown as non system. These access points are dear to us and should not be closed or ‘naturalized’. This is a pocket of stakeholders who cherish and frequent public lands. A management area that denigrates our trail experience or prevents our ingress cannot be construed as a desired outcome. While the properties are in BLM area, a PCT management area could easily result in the closure of all non system routes at the border of USFS lands. The MOU cited in the 2012 PCT OLR guidelines call for the BLM to implement the PCT management area, further exacerbating our anxiety. Therefore this is an adamant reason for objecting to the PCT management area. That isn’t a desired outcome. A review of the circumstances and practices from the past to present will show good will and good neighbors, and that the values of the PCT are not being denigrated. Also, there are no industrial, commercial, or residential developments in this area that the USFS or the BLM are going to allow for. Kern County does not allow for further subdividing of property, and rarely do they permit. Banks do not lend and insurers shy away from wildlands, as they call them, so threats to the PCT have already been minimized. Finally, we object since we don’t know and have been unable to ascertain the following:

* USFS cannot share the PCT land acquisition inventory with us, the property owners.
* We don’t know where the identified optimal trail locations exist but the guidelines call for the USFS to maintain the GPS inventoried data.
* The guidelines call an ‘evaluation across administrative boundaries’, ‘regardless of land ownership.’ So, we don’t know what determinations the BLM has made.
* We don’t know who is reviewing our land ownership patterns.

We think a no change status of the PCT as it is presently, along with no change in the management of the land is the most suitable alternative. The PCT experience is about as high as it can be with the available viewsheds balanced by safety and proximity to roads that serve the PCT hikers and angels. A no change alternative would leave other forest users, recreators and stakeholders on an equal footing, and equal under the law. There are no cited issues with private property or transgressions onto those properties. Recreationists report they rarely if ever see hikers on the trail, though we know people are hiking it. The possibility of encounters with PCT hikers are much more likely at Landers Campground and at the base of the mountain where the PCT crosses Kelso Valley Road.

Sincerely,

Nate Sciacqua

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