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Hollister Bureau of Land Management Office Gets New Manager

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Hollister - The more than 300,000 acres of land overseen by the federal Bureau of Land Management's Hollister office will soon come under the supervision of a new field manager, the BLM recently announced.

Rick Cooper, currently manager of the Cosumnes River Preserve in southern Sacramento County, will take over the BLM's Hollister field office in April, according to California BLM State Director Mike Pool.

"Rick brings a wealth of experience in working with other federal, state and county officials and agencies to build seamless partnerships that benefit all those involved," Pool said in a written statement after announcing Cooper's appointment on Feb. 1.

A BLM employee in California for 27 years, Cooper began his career as a range conservationist in Susanville. He has also worked for the BLM in Cedarville and Folsom in water resources, wild horse management and land use

planning.

Cooper said he hopes his experience and focus on fostering trust and building partnerships will be an asset as he prepares to take the helm of Hollister's 35-employee BLM office.

"I believe field office staffs have the greatest potential to positively affect public service, determine appropriate resource use and provide resource protection on the public lands," he said in a written statement.

Cooper will replace acting Field Manager George Hill, who slid into the position in August after former Field Manager Robert Beehler retired following an investigation which revealed that Beehler had misused a government credit card. Beehler used the card to get nearly \$18,000 in government money for personal use. He was ordered to pay back the money and was allowed to retire.

Hill, who will return to his position as assistant field manager at the Hollister office, said that balancing peoples' right to use BLM land while also protecting the land itself is difficult. The

Hollister Field Office oversees about 315,000 acres of public lands in 11 Central California counties, including San Benito.

"The challenges of public land management are trying to provide for multiple uses and at the same time protecting resources," he said.

That balancing act is illustrated by the ongoing legal dispute surrounding the rare San Benito Evening Primrose, which grows in the asbestos-laden soil of the Clear Creek Management Area - a spot popular with off-road vehicle drivers.

In November, 2004, the Center for Biological Diversity and the California Native Plant Society filed a suit against the BLM, claiming its management plan for the area - which cut the 400 miles of off-road routes at Clear Creek nearly by half - does not go far enough to protect the primrose.

Off-roaders have said they understand that a compromise may be necessary, but they feel that they are losing their ability to enjoy their favorite pastime. A federal judge will revisit the case on Feb. 24, Hill said.

In addition to off-road enthusiasts, campers, bikers, hikers and hunters of wild pigs recreate at Clear Creek - which is located about an hour south of Hollister and consists of about 75,000 acres of barren terrain and abandoned mines.

Hill has said he believes his office has taken adequate steps to protect the primrose by fencing off areas where the flower grows, and directing off-road routes away from its habitat.