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Bellemont shooting range ditched

By CHRIS MARKHAM

Sun Staff Reporter

01/30/2005

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Nearly 2 1/2 years after ceremoniously breaking ground on an 770-acre, \$8 million shooting range in Bellemont, Arizona Game and Fish officials are abandoning the site to settle a lawsuit filed by local residents.

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"It looks like they're just going to walk away from it," Tempe attorney Howard Shanker said.

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Game and Fish has terminated a land-swap agreement with the Forest Service that would have provided land for the range six miles west of Flagstaff, and the Justice Department is reviewing a settlement for release before the end of February.

A Game and Fish official said the state remains committed to a shooting range in northern Arizona -- just not at Bellemont.

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Shanker represents several Bellemont and Baderville residents who opposed the shooting range, contending the project was going up too close to their houses.

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Those residents sued the U.S. Forest Service in August 2003 in U.S. District Court to stop a land-swap deal that would have exchanged the Bellemont property for a number of state-owned parcels within the Coconino and Kaibab national forests.

The court ruled against the residents, who then appealed the case to the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, which ordered the case to go through formal mediation.

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That case appears to be settled. An agreement written by the U.S. Justice Department is being reviewed by Forest Service and Department of Agriculture officials in Washington, D.C

.. said Sandra Nagiller, appeals and litigation coordinator for the Forest Service in Flagstaff.

Shanker confirmed the settlement was

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pending.

"We anticipate that the settlement will go through before the end of February," Shanker said.

He added, "We sued them basically to stop the shooting range and I think we've done our job."

All parties said Friday they were unable to comment further on the settlement because it remained pending.

Arizona Game and Fish commissioners voted Jan. 21 to terminate a land-swap deal with the Forest Service for the 770-acre parcel that would have been used for the project -- essentially killing the project, at least for that area.

"We are committed to a range in northern Arizona," said Don Winslow, chief of education for Arizona Game and Fish. "We think the ranges are extremely important for a number of reasons."

Game and Fish wanted to build the range to accommodate 1,050 shooters at any time, with a maximum of 3,268 shooters a day. The range would have been open from 7 a.m. to sunset, with night-time shootings ending at 10 p.m. twice a week, according to the Forest Service environmental report.

Winslow said his department will continue looking for alternate sites, though none is under consideration at this time. Alternate sites will need to be about 800 acres, away from residential developments and with good access to water, electricity and roadways.

"We're basically running a business when we run a shooting range," Winslow said.

There are no established shooting ranges in northern Arizona, forcing many shooters to use makeshift ranges in the forests, he said.

"There's a lot of areas where people go," he said. "But sometimes that's not good because sometimes people are not responsible and you end up with trash and all that kind of stuff."

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