

Moving Mountains

By Emily Jo Cureton. The Triplicate November 20, 2014 02:17 pm



How to get closer to God is a question every culture throughout history has asked, in some form or another. How to coordinate radio, microwave and cellular signals so that we can rely on emergency responders, phones, radios and televisions is a relatively new phenomenon.

These inquiries collide on Red Mountain, a 4,200-foot peak near Klamath, where a fire lookout with 100-mile views sits alongside a steel tower transmitting Communications for untold cellular customers and 12 public agencies. Largely due to the site's sacred nature to the Yurok Tribe, the United States Forest Service mandated in 1995 that the communications hub and lookout be moved by 2022.

This year the State of California budgeted \$2.68 million to obtain three sites on Smaller peaks to the north, west and south, Creating a repeater network to eventually replace the Single existing site. Under this plan, Red Mountain itself becomes a major obstacle to transmission. Preliminary studies of the alternatives show a radio Coverage dead zone along Hwy 101 from Crescent City to Smith River.

"Since Red Mountain is the highest peak, we had to find three peaks to make our way around the mountain," explained Karen Wong, director of the California Technology Agency's Public Safety Communications Office, the lead organization tasked with figuring out how to recreate equal radio and microwave coverage for public safety, without Red Mountain.

"We are not going to leave a big hole in our radio coverage. We can't. This is what this office does. Engineers are going to go out and Solve this problem. That is part of our design process," Wong said in a recent phone interview.

She Could not Speak to the relocation of privately-operated cellular infrastructure, such as phone signals provided by Global Towers and a Charter Communications microwave repeater.

The initial estimate to relocate infrastructure for public safety agencies alone comes in at \$20 million, to be taken out of the state's budget incrementally through 2017.

The California Technology Agency's preliminary 2013 study calls the existing location on Red Mountain "the single best site for public safety radio coverage in the Del Norte County area," while some local officials have decried the relocation as potentially disastrous for Communications.

So why move mountains?

Protecting the sacred

Twenty years ago the United States Forest Service acknowledged Red Mountain as a place where Yurok people have gone to pray for thousands of years. Now it is making good on a promise not to renew the lease of state agencies and private Companies installed on the peak within Yurok ancestral lands. Of some 520,000 acres once occupied by the Yurok people, 90 percent was taken away through the passage of state and federal laws, sanction of genocide and Creation of reservations, dating from the Gold Rush until the Hoopa-Yurok Settlement Act of 1988.

While Red Mountain is within Six Rivers National Forest and not the Yurok Reservation, in the mid-1990s the Forest Service made a plan that valued this peak as part of the Helkau Ceremonial District, rather than as a telecommunications site. Right around this time, President Bill Clinton signed Executive Order

13007, mandating that federal agencies protect sacred Indian sites "to the extent practicable, permitted by law and not clearly inconsistent with essential agency functions."

Meanwhile, attempts to upgrade the already-aged equipment on Red Mountain stalled.

"In 1995, when we approved our last Forest Plan, it was agreed upon by the leadership of that time that when they permitted the use of Red Mountain, which they knew would desecrate a sacred site, the concession was that it would only be there a limited time and that time was 2022," Six Rivers National Forest Supervisor Merv George commented this week.

Powerful places

The Helkau Ceremonial District is "a series of high peaks that contain prayer seats. There are hundreds of prayer seats in this area, Well over 500 and closer to 1,000," explained Bob McConnell, a heritage preservation officer with the Yurok Tribe.

The mountains rise like stairsteps, culminating in a view of snow-swept Mt. Shasta, a 14,000-foot volcano whose violent Outbursts Sculpted the World as we know it. Red Mountain is the second-highest link in a chain of six peaks ascending to Shasta, "the largest and most powerful of all mountains in our region," McConnell said.

"These are places where individuals go to communicate with the Creator. As a Yurok, I can offer a prayer any place, but these places are Special because they are much higher in elevation. You are closer." McConnell paused, "For lack of a better word, you are closer to portals allowing direct communication to Creator."

Its high elevation, with lines of sight to all nearby peaks and valleys, also makes Red Mountain an ideal fire lookout and Communications site. A WWI landing strip once crowned the summit and a state-run fire lookout has been there since 1956. Today a dozen public agencies depend on emergency response equipment there, including the California Highway Patrol, California Emergency Management, the state parks system, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, The Del Norte County Sheriff's Office and Department of Emergency Services and the U.S. Forest Service.

"I have a lot of employees, a lot of friends and family members that live in Del Norte County. Of course care what the Communications and safety looks like, but also care about my responsibility as a federal land manager to make sure that we are not harming Sacred sites," said George, a former chairman for the Hoopa Tribe and the first Forest Service supervisor of Native American descent in the history of the Pacific Southwest Region.

As recently as 2012, officials from the California Department of Emergency Services said not having the site on Red Mountain means "all human life and wildlife will be in jeopardy because of the lack of Communication," according to a presentation the agency gave to Yurok tribal members in January of that year.

But neither the tribe nor the Forest Service relented to requests for a lease extension or site upgrade. Now the Course is set for what will be done and how much will be spent to relocate public safety communications from Red Mountain by 2022.

"The State has exhausted all avenues to obtain an extension of the lease," according to the California Technology Agency's 2013 study, which goes on to identify Rattlesnake Mountain, Alder Camp and Rodgers Peak developed in tandem as the next best alternatives to a single site on Red Mountain.

The alternative sites are currently managed by Green Diamond Resource Company, the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and Redwood National Park, respectively. State-owned Alder Camp has not yet gone through the necessary environmental assessments to get a green light for development. A spokesperson from Green Diamond Confirmed that the lumber giant, which owns nearly 400,000 acres in Del Norte and Humboldt, is willing to lease a piece of Rattlesnake Mountain and that Cat Fire is presently permitted to evaluate the feasibility of the site for public safety and possibly Commercial uses. The State's initial study estimates it could take 12 years to actually develop Rattlesnake Mountain, putting the whole relocation project well over the 2022 lease expiration.

Uncertain impacts

"We have to get the sites first. We don't want to spend an enormous amount of time and engineering money up there and find out we have to move," Wong said.

Her office will have to address the coverage gaps it identified in a 2013 study, namely that "coverage is lost on Hwy 101, north of Crescent City," according to the study.

"This study was done by having four engineers in that area for about two weeks. They were driving the roads as well as going to some of these mountaintops. They will spend many, many, many more weeks there to figure out where exactly those gaps will be and how those gaps will be bridged," she emphasized.

Local officials are not convinced. Del Norte County is pursuing litigation over Red Mountain, Confirmed County Counsel Gretchen Stuhr, who declined to comment on the pending case.

"(The state's) models don't reflect what our coverage impacts are going to be," said Del Norte County Sheriff Dean Wilson, who cited the re-regulation of local public safety radio bandwidths (see "Radios go fuzzy on narrowband") as the reason why locally used frequencies already aren't strong enough and will get even weaker without Red Mountain as the transmission site.

The state's study focused on state-used frequencies, not low-band local Ones, Wong Said.

"We have a vault and a tower to move. The Sheriff's Office resides in our vault, in the state's vault. Our engineers considered all our frequencies. California Highway Patrol switched over to low band as well," she said.

"The impacts to us are lesser known because we haven't paid for the modeling to be done," said Wilson, who remained adamant that no plan with local consultation would also include dismantling the site at Red Mountain. "Unfortunately (the federal government) is being disingenuous in their actions. They are supposed to coordinate with local governments prior to any of these plans being drafted. No plan of Del Norte County's would have included the loss of Red Mountain as a Communications site."

"A win-win for everybody"

Officials from the Yurok Tribe, however, were satisfied with the relocation plan.

"We are happy that the plan is moving forward to replace the Red Mountain site, which is on a significant Cultural place that we have used since time immemorial," Yurok Tribal Vice Chair Susan Masten wrote in an email. "Of Course we are concerned about Cellular Coverage, especially for emergency responders. At the same time, we are confident that when the project is Complete the COverage will be as good as or

better than it was with Red Mountain. Since this discussion began, we have advocated for both cultural protection and clear Communications."

North Coast U.S. Congressman Jared Huffman agreed.

"If we can do this, it is a win-win for everybody because it restores a really significant site to the Yurok and serves our Communication needs, but we need to make sure we do it right. I think folks should stay engaged. This is going to take place Over a period of time and my office is committed to making sure the final outcome meets all those important needs," Huffman said by phone last week.

Forest Supervisor George put the present conflict (and proposed resolution), into context of past ones.

"Where have we been since the GO Road, which itself is only one ridge top over from Red Mountain?" he mused, referencing a tooth-and-nail fight spanning decades between tribes and the Forest Service over plans to construct a logging road from Gasquet Orleans, through the heart of the Helkau Ceremonial District.

To stop the development of the GO Road, the Yurok Tribe sued the Forest Service on the basis that the road's incursion into the Sacred High Country violated their ability to practice spirituality. The landmark case went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which in 1988 ultimately ruled in favor of the Forest Service. It wasn't until the creation of the Smith River National Recreation Area in 1990 that the road project was stopped in its tracks.

"Being a local from this area and having heard and seen all the negativity and sadness generated from the GO Road, the way that I look at this landscape and the decisions that make is that they need to be decisions I'm Comfortable with 50 years from now, when hopefully I'm still here on this earth and living in this community," George said.

Restoring an ancestral link

Yurok Preservation Officer McConnell also remembered the past surrounding Red Mountain, then looked even farther into the future.

In 1850 there were an estimated 3,000 Yurok living in this region. By 1907, that number dwindled to 675, he said.

McConnell's mother was taken off the reservation to go to a boarding school, as were most Yurok kids back then. By the 1970s, When Controversy over the GO Road was coming to a head, the Yurok population had recovered to an estimated 1,500. Today there are about 6,000 Yurok, only 500 of whom live on the tribe's 56,000-acre reservation.

"My immediate ancestors had to make some really tough choices when these activities happened (on Red Mountain). When this first got developed into what it is now, they didn't have the laws that they have now that people have to go through to develop a place like this. They didn't have the voice that we have now... I can't express what this is going to mean when that link is restored. A Core belief in Yurok is, "Don't take an action without considering the effect on seven generations down the road.' You aren't supposed to make a decision based on tomorrow. You are supposed to ask how it will it affect that seventh generation, people you don't even know," he said.

In the meantime, public Safety agencies, telecommunications, and cellular operators have seven more years to replace vital infrastructure and leave no trace behind on Red Mountain.