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Sunday, February 17, 2002

University unveils plans to build Okanogan River research station

By K.C. Mehaffey

World staff writer

RIVERSIDE -- Central Washington University wants to buy the last stretch of undisturbed land on the Okanogan River and build a research station for students to study natural sciences, from spawning salmon to ancient pictographs.

As a first step, the state university has teamed up with the nonprofit Stewardship Partners of Seattle and is asking for \$2.9 million from the Bonneville Power Administration to help buy the 1,671 acres near Riverside. The BPA funds are set aside for fish-enhancement projects in the region.

The property is owned by Ed Pariseau, Jerry Sherrard, and Carl and Wini Voelckers. The purchase price is \$6.8 million.

If the purchase goes through, CWU will build a dormitory, kitchen and classroom for 25 to 50 students at the south end of the property. It will be called the McLaughlin Falls Field Station.

CWU plans to set up cameras hooked to the Internet and develop curriculum for students from kindergarten through high school to learn about natural sciences from their classrooms, said Dr. Richard Mack, CWU associate vice president for graduate studies, research and faculty. Mack said the university will seek remaining funds for the purchase from nonprofit groups and individuals. The university has yet to arrive at a total cost estimate for the entire project.

Mack said the land, with 6.2 miles of river frontage including McLaughlin Falls, is the only roadless area on the 80 miles of the Okanogan River between Brewster and the Canadian border.

The property has undisturbed shrub steppe prairie, wetlands, old-growth timber and abundant wildlife, including mule deer, bear, mountain lions, sharp tailed grouse, and bighorn sheep, he said.

The university also will compensate for a reduction in the county's tax base by making payments in lieu of taxes, he said.

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in Washington state.



One local group is currently supporting the project, while others -- including county commissioners -- have not yet taken a position.

Larry Bailey, executive director of Upper Columbia Regional Fisheries Enhancement Group, said his group sent a letter supporting the research station, and may even become a partner with Central Washington University. He said the research center would be an economic boon to the area.

Bailey said preserving that stretch of river will also fit in nicely with a restoration project his group is doing farther up river.

Lael Duncan, president of Alliance 2005, a countywide group working to promote a healthy local economy, said her board will consider whether to support the project at its March 13 meeting. "I'm convinced it's a positive step for economic development in the county," Duncan said.

She said she has heard concerns that CWU is seeking BPA ratepayer funds to purchase the land. She said the money is already set aside to enhance fisheries throughout the region.

"It's just a matter of whether it goes to Okanogan County or some other county," she said.

The Okanogan County Citizens Coalition, which represents 22 land-use organizations, hasn't yet taken a stand on the project.

Coalition chairman Mel Stone said they haven't had time to thoroughly research the project, but he personally feels the county doesn't need more land taken out of private ownership. He also questioned some of the claims -- such as the presence of bighorn sheep.

"I've hunted that area for years, and I've never seen a bighorn," he said.



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