

Group mulls Heart Mountain historic site status

By The Associated Press

Wednesday, May 27, 2009 2:02 AM MDT

POWELL -- A study is being sought to determine whether the Heart Mountain Relocation Camp in northern Wyoming should become a National Historic Site.

Historic sites are managed by the National Park Service.

A private, nonprofit foundation has been leading the effort to preserve and commemorate the site where more than 11,000 Japanese-Americans were held during World War II.

The foundation is asking the state's congressional delegation to authorize a special resource study for the site. Among other things, a study would make a recommendation as to whether the site should become a National Historic Site, managed by the National Park Service.

The study would have to be authorized by Congress.

Foundation president Dave Reetz said the group isn't necessarily advocating Park Service management. Instead, it just wants to examine all the options.

A special resource study, he said, would ask for a great deal of public comment, including from former internees and present-day adjoining land owners.

"We would be remiss as an organization in not having this done," Reetz said.

The Park County Commission, the Powell Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Park County Travel Council, the Cody Country Chamber of Commerce, the Wyoming Business Council, former U.S. Secretary of the Interior Norm Mineta and former U.S. Senator Al Simpson have joined with the foundation in requesting the study.

In asking Wyoming's congressional delegation to endorse a study, Park County commissioners wrote, "Not only is this place an important part of our history, it has the ability to provide another economic resource and stimulus to our region and state that is so critical."

At the commission's May 12 meeting, Commissioner Bucky Hall said he supported the foundation's effort, but he also asked if it was what the group really wanted.

"Do you want to give up control to the National Park Service?" he asked.

"How long do you think we're going to live?" asked Pat Wolfe, foundation treasurer, in response.

"You may live to see that nightmare," said Hall, with a chuckle. "They may close it when you don't want it closed."

Reetz stressed that a study would only make recommendations.

"It doesn't require action," he said.

A 2001 report compiled by the U.S. Department of the Interior suggested that the 74 remaining acres of Bureau of Reclamation land at the Heart Mountain site be transferred to Park Service control.

The relocation camp was built on some 20,000 acres, 4,600 of that Bureau of Reclamation acreage. After the camp was dissolved in 1945, the majority of the property was transferred to private ownership.

Today, only 124 acres of the camp remain -- 74 belonging to the Bureau of Reclamation. The remaining 50 acres where a learning center currently under construction sits are owned by the Heart Mountain, Wyoming Foundation.

Scheduled for a grand opening next summer, the learning center will house interactive exhibits, historic replicas and documents, as well as a theater.