

THE BLM ADOPT-A-CABIN PROGRAM: EXCESS OF ENTHUSIASM, SHORTAGE OF OVERSIGHT

STEPHEN P. HORNE
BASIN AND RANGE HERITAGE CONSULTANTS
TERREBONNE, OREGON

Adopt-a-Cabin was a BLM site stewardship program directed toward preservation and adaptive reuse of historical mining cabins in the western Great Basin and Mojave Desert near Ridgecrest, California. The program had good intentions and was directed toward a need for preservation of historical structures. However, the program lacked supervision by cultural resources professionals. Problems developed with stabilization and improvement activities by some volunteers. A new, more carefully designed and supervised program is now in place, but the history of this program demonstrates the importance of professional supervision of site stewards, establishment of baseline conditions, and regular monitoring of site condition.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has long relied on the kindness of strangers in its effort to protect cultural resources in the California desert. Programs of volunteer site stewardship are an important example of seeking the assistance of others (Musser-Lopez 2010). This paper examines one such program that flourished from the late 1980s to 2005. Its history, problems, and achievements are both instructive and cautionary for agencies and others who manage site stewardship programs or who are contemplating relying on such programs as a means to offset the effects of limited professional staff and scarce funding.¹

THE ADOPT-A-CABIN PROGRAM

“Adopt-a-Cabin” was a volunteer partnership program administered by the Ridgecrest Field Office (RFO) of BLM. The Adopt-a-Cabin Program operated from approximately 1990 to 2005. The program was developed with the stated purpose of saving “all remaining cabins on public land which are determined to have any historical or recreational use values” (Bureau of Land Management 2001). These cabins, almost all directly associated with mining, are highly valued by many local residents and others, who view them as an important legacy and a worthwhile recreation destination.

Even though these simple cabins range widely in age from the early twentieth century to perhaps the late 1960s and occupy widely scattered sites, they do not stand alone, and their potential significance may not reside simply in their individual characteristics. The cabins are structural remnants of a great human economic endeavor that continues into today, regardless of whether they were the idiosyncratic dwellings of individual miners or the centers of paying mines in established mining districts.

The immediate impetus for the program was a pulse of public concern over the condition and management of historical cabins in the mountains and desert managed by RFO (Bureau of Land Management 2001; Horne and Musser-Lopez 2008, Martha Dickes, personal communication 2005). Historically, RFO regarded its legacy of old cabins as a problem. They were viewed as attractive nuisances with significant health and safety issues and as a source of public property trespass, bringing squatters and other problems. BLM generally and RFO specifically were chronically underfunded, and a simple, economical response was to eliminate the cabins. This was accomplished through passive neglect or by burning them down and, essentially, walking away from smoking ruins (Russell Kaldenberg, personal communication 2010) -- a de facto “burn-a-cabin” program. This practice left a legacy of cinders and ash, lost history, and angry concerned citizens. Years of this practice generated the distrust of many



Figure 1. (left) Beveridge Cabin in 2006, view northwest; (right) undergoing stabilization (ca. 1990), view southeast.

citizens, adverse publicity, and negative public attention, and, consequently, it raised the political stakes for managers.

In the late 1980s, the BLM's mindset of cabins-as-a-problem began a global shift. Because of the vision and persistence of one person, Steve Smith, the "cabin problem" came to be seen, at least in some cases, by RFO as the "cabin opportunity." In 1989, a concerned Inyo Mountains hiker approached the Ridgecrest BLM concerning a proposal to arrest the deterioration and threatened collapse of Beveridge Cabin, a much-loved but structurally compromised miner's cabin situated in a remote and spectacular site high within the Inyo Mountains Wilderness (Figure 1, left). Smith, against all odds, convinced managers to support the project, which they did by extending permission and by providing materials and significant logistical support entailing delivery of supplies and materials to the difficult site by helicopter. With labor provided by Friends of the Inyo Mountains, a group formed specifically to save and maintain historic Inyo Mountains mining cabins, Beveridge Cabin was successfully stabilized. New roofing and both internal and external structural supports were installed (Figure 1, right). Given the existing conditions at the cabin, this intervention is likely the sole reason it remained standing. The success of that effort generated positive publicity which, in turn, generated public interest. Soon several groups and individuals had approached BLM, expressing a wish to help save other public-land cabins. From those beginnings, a program encompassing 32 cabins was in place by 2004. By any measure, this was a rapid program expansion. The rapid growth of the program was due in part to positive public reaction, public pressure, and, perhaps most importantly, because of a long tradition of volunteerism and cultural site stewardship in the California desert (Musser-Lopez 2010).

At its core, the program consisted of agreements between groups or individual volunteer stewards and the BLM for the purpose of adopting a cabin, providing for its care, and demonstrating to the public that the cabins were both important and cared for. Evidence of care is one of the most powerful tools that an agency has to thwart the persistent pressure of vandalism or, as it is more delicately known, "depreciative behavior" on the part of some visitors to public lands (Horne and McFarland 1995). In exchange, stewards and members of the public were allowed to use the cabins for backcountry recreation, such use including overnight stays, caretaking and making repairs, group retreats or gatherings, and the like.

Adopt-a-Cabin was never a part of the RFO Cultural Heritage Program. It was, from its inception, a program of the RFO Recreation Division, which did not manage the cultural resources program. The Adopt-a-Cabin Program's placement within an organization structure may not seem important to those who have not worked in a bureaucratic agency. In actuality, it is an extremely critical and significant factor, one that affected the development of the entire program, having to do with lines of

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communication, authority, and power; access to decision-makers; and internal consensus about the core mission.

The Recreation Branch fosters recreational use of public lands, while the cultural resources staff fosters programs of compliance and preservation of significant archaeological and historic sites. These different objectives are reflected in the way that the Adopt-a-Cabin Program unfolded. The cultural resources staff, focused primarily on prehistoric resources, nevertheless expressed concern over a number of factors, including the inadequate, or entirely missing, baseline condition reporting; the absence of Section 106 compliance, including inventory, evaluation, and consultation; and the likelihood that changes would be made to the cabins by undertakings of volunteer stewards. Managers of the Adopt-a-Cabin program had their own imperatives, and these did not include compliance. Instead, materials were purchased by the BLM and given to the volunteers for maintenance and repairs. The imperatives also did not include direct supervision or control of the activities of the volunteer stewards.

The Adopt-a-Cabin Program at its outset was comparatively simple and involved a small group of dedicated stewards who performed minor maintenance. By 2004, the scope of the activities conducted under the program had changed, and activities of some stewards had gone far beyond the simple maintenance and use that was originally envisioned. “Original Bigfoot” (2003), a habitué of a web-based message board characterized by regular, mildly anti-government content, captured why the scope and management of the program resonated with some:

...look at what I believe is one of the greatest success stories on public lands I have seen. The Adopt-A-Cabin program. Here you have the BLM providing some material, and VOLUNTEERS taking it from there. These cabins are almost always well maintained, well stocked with food and supplies. Some of these places are nicer than most motel rooms I have been in...a couple are nicer than my house.

The program and especially the limited BLM role in supervision appealed to a class of volunteers who wished to take their own path in creating rustic retreats without interference and meddling by the federal government.

While the program resonated with volunteers, it had become increasingly problematic. It had become known that some of the cabins had been modified, extensively or otherwise, by volunteer stewards and others, without guidance or prior baseline inventory (Judyth Reed, personal communication 2010) or evaluation for eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Such inventory and evaluation is required by Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and under the terms of the two statewide BLM programmatic agreements that were in effect during the span of the program’s operation.

Concern was not limited to the professional staff of BLM’s cultural resources program. In 2004, the State Office of Historic Preservation and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation intervened with concerns surrounding the program, including modifications made to unevaluated historic structures. The Resource Area Manager readily agreed there were issues and commissioned an assessment of the program’s effects, with a focus on determining existing baseline conditions and the extent to which the integrity of individual cabins had been affected by modifications thought to have taken place.

THE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

An assessment program was undertaken in 2005 through 2007. This program was focused on developing an understanding of the scope of effects of the Adopt-a-Cabin program on the potential eligibility of 14 cabins included under the umbrella of the Adopt-a-Cabin Program (Table 1). The selected cabins are situated in five different areas or localities: El Paso Mountains, the Argus Range, Coso Range vicinity, Saline Valley, and Inyo Mountains (Figure 2).

The primary goals of this assessment were to determine existing baseline conditions and the extent to which the integrity of individual cabins had been affected by recent modifications. Secondary

Table 1. List of cabins by geographic group.

GEOGRAPHIC GROUP	CABIN NAME(S)
Argus Range	Kopper King
	Minnietta (Minietta)
	Osborne
	Stone Canyon
Coso Area	Astro Artz (Astro Arts, Astral Arts)
El Paso Mountains	Burro Schmidt
	Dawson
	Edith E.
	Mingus Mead (Mingus Meade, Mingusville)
Saline Valley	Boxcar (Buckhorn)
	Beveridge Millsite
Inyo Mountains	Bighorn
	Frenchy's

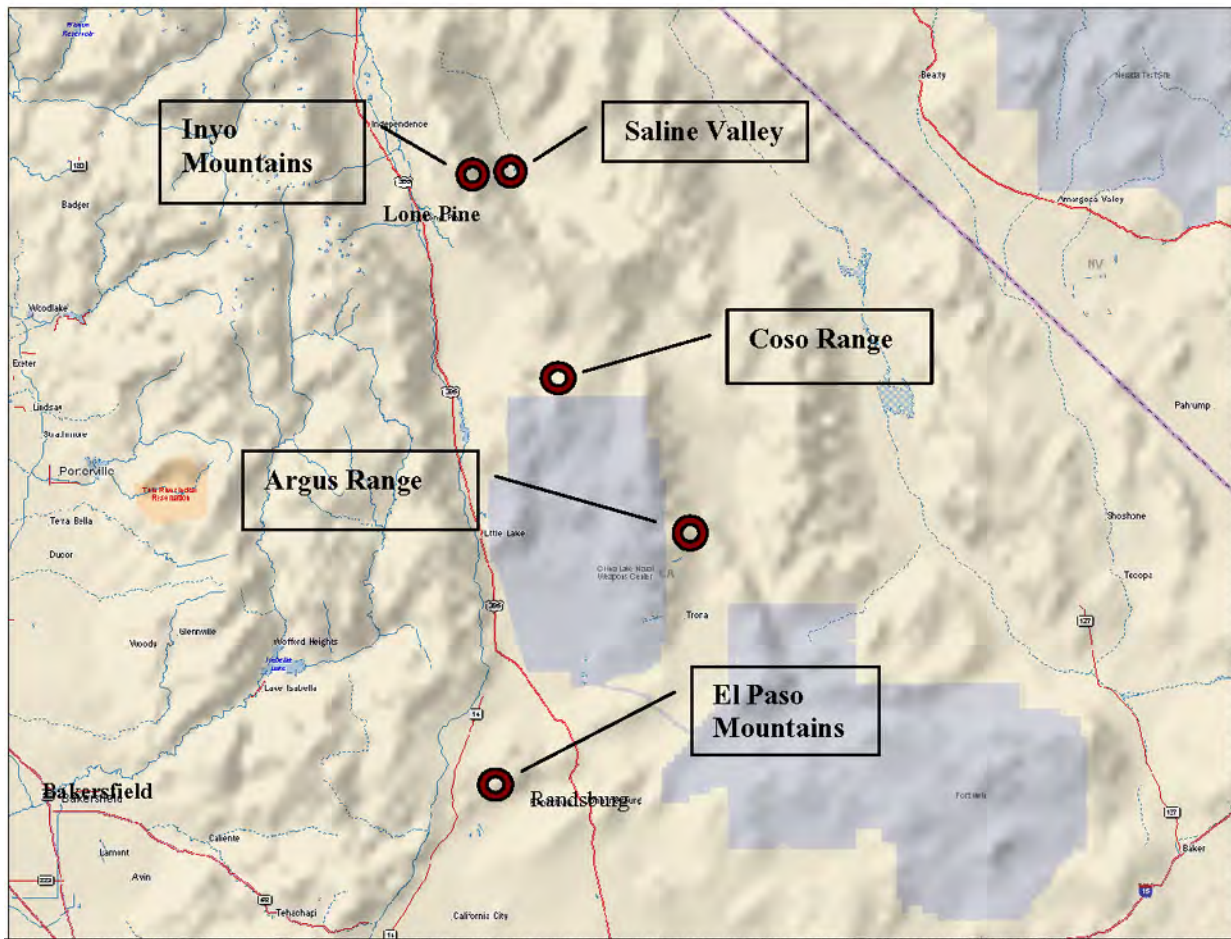


Figure 2. Location of the five study areas.



Figure 3. (left) Beveridge Millsite Cabin, view north; (right) view southeast, ca. 1960. The red line shows the original roofline. (Photograph: Friends of Boxcar Cabin)

goals of this assessment included offering recommendations for structural stabilization and correction of modifications at specific properties, and offering recommendations and findings concerning the Adopt-a-Cabin Program.

The findings and recommendations resulting from the assessment are only the first step in a longer process that will lead to resolution of compliance issues, development of engineering-based assessments, and management decisions concerning continuation of stewardship programs and the disposition of each of the 14 cabins. It is important to understand what the assessment did not include. The scope of the assessment explicitly excluded a program of historical documents research, archaeological survey, and site inventory, and, similarly, did not encompass formal findings concerning potential eligibility of individual properties for listing on the National Register of Historic Places

The work carried out for this assessment was essentially a program of fact-finding rather than formal research or a formal structural condition assessment. The most salient characteristic of the Adopt-a-Cabin Program's implementation -- aside from noncompliance with Section 106 -- was the almost complete absence of baseline information for the cabins, dating from the time of their adoption. It followed, then, that the primary focus of the field studies conducted at each cabin for this assessment was directed toward development of baseline information.

Remote cabins such as these were not built with long-term preservation in mind; they tended to grow organically in response to need and, in some cases, changing purpose. A persistent issue that impinged on the development of baseline conditions was separating modifications made during a cabin's original life and more recent modifications made during the period of time in which the cabins were part of the Adopt-a-Cabin Program. While it was not always clear whether particular modifications predated the program, an effort was made to estimate their extent for each cabin. The Beveridge Millsite Cabin illustrates this common situation. Figure 3 (left) shows the cabin as it presently appears and (right) as it existed during the 1970s; the current cabin is structurally identical. Figure 4 shows the original cabin footprint and the extent of structural changes made during the use-life of the structure (none of these changes are attributable to Adopt-a-Cabin volunteers).

FINDINGS OF THE ASSESSMENT PROGRAM

Findings concerning the effects of the "maintenance" work at the cabins fell into three basic categories: (1) minimal effects, where the work was sensitive, followed the principles of replacement-in-kind and reversibility, and was appropriately minimal; (2) intermediate effects, where the intervention did not involve structural modifications but which used, at least in part, materials or techniques inappropriate for historic structures; and (3) significant effects, where the work adversely affected structural elements.

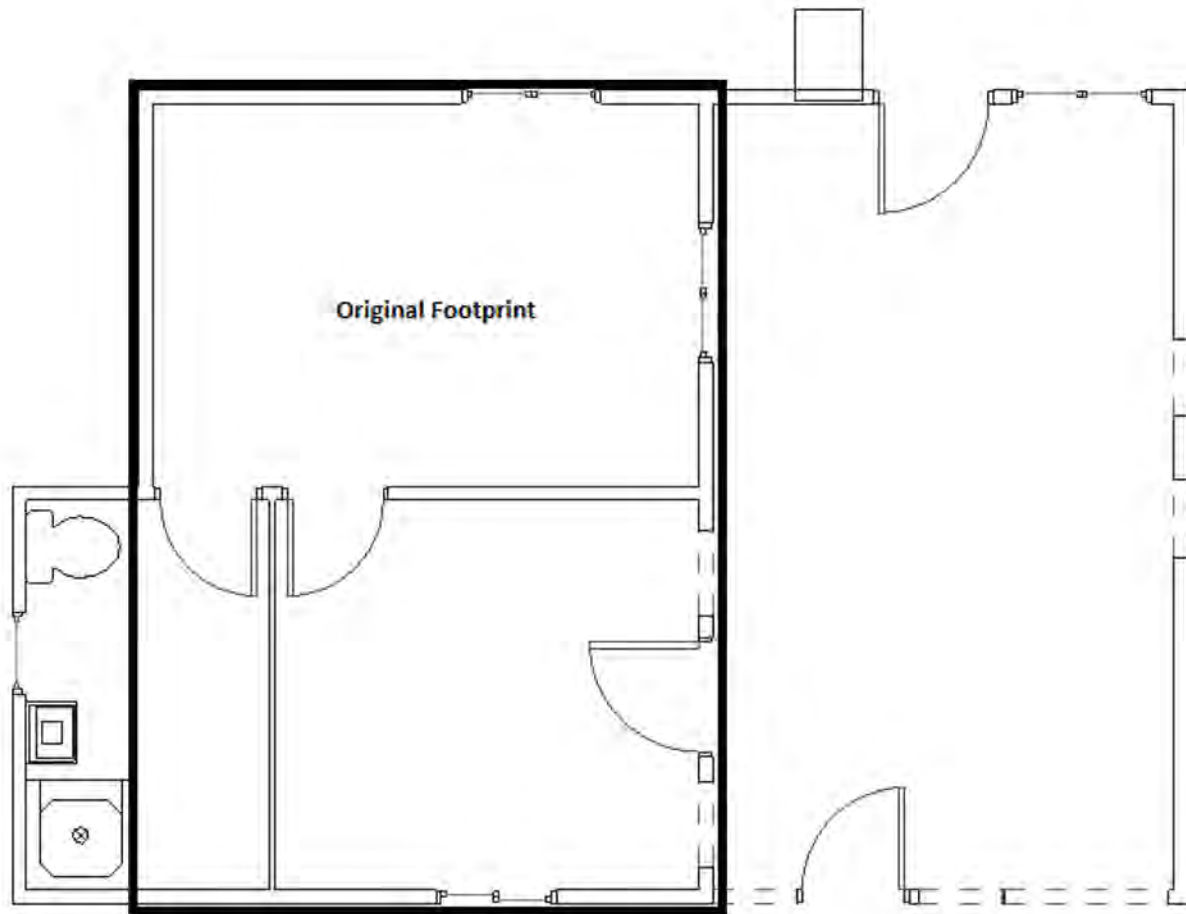


Figure 4. The floor plan of the Beveridge Millsite Cabin, depicting the original cabin footprint (within heavy line) and subsequent modifications.

The following paragraphs provide one example of each level of intervention. I use the term “stabilization” to describe the work done at the cabins, but I use this term loosely, not intending to suggest that the stabilization work is consistent with the use of the term by cultural resources professionals.

The Stone Canyon Cabin (Figure 5), situated in the Argus Range on the western side of Panamint Valley, is a good example of work which had minimal effects. Overall, the stabilization appears to have made substantial use of original building fabric and, with a few small exceptions in details of finish, replacement has been in kind. The stabilization work was sensitive to the building, reversible, and appropriately minimal (Figure 6). The scope of the repairs involved rebuilding windows in kind, repairing and rehanging the door (Figure 7), and supporting structurally compromised rafters and joists. The stabilization work has contributed to the continued structural soundness of the building, helping to preserve it into the future.

Boxcar Cabin (Figure 7) provides a good example of an intermediate level of stabilization which has had an effect on the cabin but which stops short of structural modification. Figure 7 (left) illustrates the exterior condition of Boxcar Cabin prior to stabilization. The failed roofing material was removed, and a new asphalt roll roof was installed. A deteriorated wood-burning stove was replaced with a handmade stove that is far safer than the original. The under-sink plumbing was repaired. Broken lights were replaced by Plexiglas. The kitchen door was replaced, and new exterior molding was installed. Some



Figure 5. (left) Stone Canyon Cabin after stabilization, view toward the southwest; (right) prior to stabilization ca. 2000, view toward west. (Photograph: Bureau of Land Management)



Figure 6. Door repair showing planed surface on door edge, replacement panel (at left) and reuse of original ball top hinge.



Figure 7. (left) Boxcar Cabin after stabilization, view toward southeast; (right) prior to stabilization work in 2003, view toward southwest. (Photograph: Friends of Boxcar Cabin)

of the work provided essential stabilization, including replacing a missing door and windows and replacing the roof, while other efforts were directed toward livability (stove, plumbing).

Osborne Cabin (Figure 8) is an example of an extreme level of unsupervised engagement in structural modification and other irreversible changes. Figure 8 (upper right) shows the appearance of the cabin during the late 1990s; although in disrepair, it was a simple, handsome, and structurally sound unreinforced cobble masonry building consisting of a single room. The extent of modifications is readily apparent in Figure 8 (upper left): a front porch, modern stovepipe, asphalt roll roofing, and a rear shed have been added. Interior views reveal how these changes have affected the rustic character of the original interior (Figure 8, lower left and right). The absence of baseline information, especially for the interior, makes the full impact of the work difficult to appreciate, and, in some cases, it is impossible to know what was original and what has been replaced or simply repaired. We do know that the front door was changed from an out-swing door to an in-swing door to avoid conflict with the rafters of the new porch; some original, hand-built kitchen cabinets were removed to provide space for a small gas range; and new paneling has been installed over interior walls and gables. While the cabin is now larger, it is diminished.

Its integrity is so severely compromised that National Register eligibility is no longer likely. James Barnes, BLM archaeologist, inventoried the Osborne Cabin and site prior to work by volunteers (Barnes 2002a). He informally evaluated the property, finding it potentially eligible under Criteria A, C, and D (Barnes 2002b). Barnes recommended a thorough recordation of the entire property including associated features, and including the associated Surprise Mine, and a formal determination of eligibility. Barnes also recommended that volunteers be provided specific, written guidelines prior to undertaking any work and that the BLM provide close oversight (Barnes 2002b). His recommendations were not followed. The fact that they were ignored underscores that the program lacked the engagement of its cultural resources professionals.

DISCUSSION

The Adopt-a-Cabin Program has come and gone. It is both useful and instructive to understand why there was a rapid florescence and then, five brief years later, why the program, which had such promise at the outset and which addressed such important preservation issues, wilted and then died.

Successful programs of site stewardship are designed for longevity, with careful thought invested in developing clear goals, selection of sites for incorporation into the program, selection and training of



Figure 8. (upper left) Osborne Cabin as it currently appears, side view toward northwest showing porch and shed additions; (upper right) southwest aspect (front) and outbuildings ca. 1997, view northeast (Photograph: BLM); (lower left) replacement rafters and sub-roof, with original ridge board still in place. Gas pipe and panel infill of gable space are also shown (at arrows); (lower right) detail of north wall of sleeping room taken from passage from original cabin.

volunteers, and program assessment. Many of these elements were absent or poorly developed in the Adopt-a-Cabin Program.

It is too facile by far to be satisfied with the idea that the program failed because it ran afoul of our national laws on public land historic preservation, although that is the proximal cause. Its failures were, in a sense, more deeply architectural than legal; the fundamental design of the program fell short of developing the structural underpinnings necessary to carry the weight of a busy and ambitious program.

At its core, the program had the philosophy that the land and resources ultimately belong to the people. This is a sound philosophical principle anchored in a fundamental truth, but it was taken to an extreme -- one where ownership by the people came to mean volunteers could be given free rein in deciding what and how historic structures would be maintained, stabilized, and used. The BLM would provide materials, and volunteer stewards could take it from there. The results are mixed, but not because of program design. The fact that some work was done in a sensitive manner as it was at Stone Canyon Cabin and that some work was outrageously inappropriate as it was at Osborne Cabin is largely

accidental, depending far more on the plans and inclinations of volunteers than it did on goals, guidelines, and leadership emanating from the program.

The stated, and unrealistic, goal of the program was to preserve all cabins that had historical or recreational value. Underlying this goal was the sense that mining cabins in the Ridgecrest Field Area were endangered as a whole. This is true. But not all cabins were equally at risk, and there never was an underlying, umbrella risk assessment that placed priorities on relative needs for maintenance and stabilization. So the impetus to place particular cabins in the program came primarily from initiatives presented by volunteers, not from the BLM. The interest and particular affection of volunteers for specific cabins drove the program, not professional assessments of need for maintenance and stabilization.

The rapid growth of the program was a significant factor in ensuring its failure. Initially, the program was driven by volunteers with little more in mind than cleaning and arresting such impending structural issues as a drifting wall. The initial success of the program in keeping falling cabins standing drew volunteers who wanted something more -- a comfortable and relatively exclusive cabin retreat in the country. Absent thoughtful and realistic goals and written guidelines, there was no mechanism to sort out which cabins were appropriate candidates, which volunteers were suitable, and what actions were necessary. Rapid growth, in and of itself, is not a problem for a site stewardship program, but only if an appropriate program framework is in place.

Given the underlying philosophy of the program and the lack of engagement of cultural resource professionals in its design and operation, it is easy to see why the program failed as an effort in historic preservation. There is little doubt that some of the cabins would not be standing today if it were not for the program. This, by itself, is not a real measure of success, especially since the greatest threat to the cabins was not nature or the natural life cycle of buildings built without long-term longevity as a goal, but the BLM itself with its incendiary proclivity toward eliminating cabins as a problem. It is interesting to note that current threats still include the BLM, but the nature of the threat has shifted from neglect and arson to an insistence from higher levels of the organization that any public use of the cabins requires retrofitting the cabins to modern building codes.

CONCLUSION

Site stewardship programs that wink in and out of existence are not a workable component of a strategy for long-term historic preservation, whether of cabins or archaeological sites. Workable programs have essential and well-recognized elements (Kelly 2007; Musser-Lopez 2010): clear goals that incorporate historic preservation as an essential component; thoughtful selection of sites for incorporation into a program; written, vetted standards and guidelines; careful selection of volunteers, including the exclusion of candidates having motives other than historic preservation; diligent education, training, and oversight of volunteers; retention of control by the land management agency; and engagement of its historic preservation professionals. Anything less guarantees failure.

NOTE

¹ The Ridgecrest BLM office has developed a new cabin stewardship program, the Historic Sites Stewardship Program, which has resolved the issues surrounding the Adopt-a-Cabin Program.

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