

CLEAR CREEK UPDATE 5/9/14

by Bill Spence - ALAA central coast representative

As it relates to rockhounds, access to BLM's Clear Creek Management Area (CCMA) in San Benito County, California is now subject to a 3-tier permitting process. It's complicated, but I'll try to explain as clearly as I can.

1. Each person entering CCMA must obtain a **recreation permit**. Every person in a vehicle (or on foot if you're hardy enough to hike in) must have one; this is how BLM tracks the number of day's exposure to the dread asbestos you have been exposed to. The form for this permit can be found on the BLM website. It needs to be filled out, signed and submitted to BLM Hollister for approval. This can be done in person during business hours or by fax or e-mail (or if you're in no hurry, by US Mail). The approved permit must be carried in your vehicle (or on your person if you're hiking) on the date of your trip. The recreation permit allows the bearer to enter CCMA and to travel on the "scenic loop" comprised of Clear Creek Road, Ridge Road and a loop that goes past the benitoite mine, KCAC mine, up a hill and back to Ridge Road. It authorizes the bearer to hike anywhere using the scenic loop as a starting point. Rockhounds should note that almost all localities of interest to lapidarists are within walking distance of the roads that comprise this loop, so in most cases you will not need a backcountry permit (#3 below). When approved, the recreation permit will provide the combination for the locked gate at the CCMA entrance.

2. All vehicles entering CCMA must get a pass at the "iron ranger" near the entrance. There is a \$5 fee per vehicle for this. It is only available to highway-licensed vehicles. Off-road vehicles are prohibited. Seniors 62 and over should note that the Iron Gate fee is waived for holders of a 'Federal Lands Senior Pass'. The Pass Number needs to be recorded on the fee envelope. The iron ranger is encountered at the entrance before the locked entry gate, so you must get a recreation permit to unlock the entry gate or you will have wasted your \$5 at the iron ranger.

3. Most of the mineral specimen collecting localities is in remote locations that require travel on roads and trails that are not part of the scenic

loop. BLM now designates these roads as "administrative routes" which are closed to the public. However, rockhounds may use certain of these roads to access specified collecting localities by obtaining a **backcountry permit**. The form for this permit is NOT on the BLM website. You must contact Hollister for the form which they can send to you as a PDF file or hard copy. On it, you must specify your destination(s) and your trip date; you may request the route you want as well. BLM will review the permit application and approve (or disapprove) and specify the routes you are authorized to use. Logistically this permit can be gotten the same way as the recreation permit, but the recreation permit is a pre-requisite to the backcountry permit for any visit. Also note that BLM has stated (in person and on the application form) that they may take up to 15 days to bless a backcountry permit. This is contrary to what this representative was led to believe in mid-March when we suggested that the BLM route manager would compile a list of available routes and that the office personnel could issue permits for any listed route. There will be more discussions with BLM on this point.

THINGS TO REMEMBER:

Private Property: BLM-issued permits authorize travel on BLM roads only. If you wish to access any private property within CCMA (especially the benitoite mine), you should make appropriate arrangements with the owner.

Gated Roads: Some roads inside CCMA have been gated with iron gates and padlocked. At least one is at the request of the property owner. If there is a locked gate on the route you request for a backcountry permit, you will be given the combination to the lock or else passage at that gate is prohibited.

Rules: The CCMA RMP contains no language that guarantees rockhounds the right to collect in CCMA. Our friends in the off-road biking community saw to that. Backcountry

permits are being made available under a principle that the government calls "adaptive management". In other words these permits are being granted at the discretion of the District Manager. So bear in mind that the right to collect at CCMA is fragile, and **FOLLOW THE RULES**.

Daylight Hours: Overnighting on BLM land within the serpentine zone at CCMA (the so called "ACEC") is prohibited. You cannot enter CCMA before sunrise, and you must exit by sundown unless you have permission to stay on one of the private in-holdings there. There are 3 BLM campgrounds just outside the ACEC, however, and another at Laguna Mountain just north of CCMA. Two are located on Clear Creek Road and one is located on the highway near the junction of San Benito and Fresno Counties.

Annual Limit: In accordance with the RMP, cumulative use of CCMA for rockhounding will be limited to 5 days per year per person.

Phone Service: Generally there is no cell phone coverage in CCMA except for a couple of places on high ridges. You cannot depend on the availability of phone coverage there.

Road Conditions: Reports are that backcountry roads are in better condition than was expected after 6 years without maintenance. BLM states that for the scenic loop, there has been a substantial amount of grading and other maintenance. Overall picture is not yet clear.