

Rodden Ranch moves closer to conservation easement

The Calaveras Enterprise Tuesday, June 7, 2011

By Joel Metzger

The California Department of Transportation has awarded \$350,000 toward acquiring a conservation easement on the 6,198-acre Rodden Ranch near Copperopolis, which would protect the land from development in perpetuity.

These funds come from a \$58 million allocation from the California Transportation Commission slated for highways, transit and rail projects statewide to support jobs and upgrade the state's transportation system.

"We are putting transportation dollars to work, creating jobs and making transportation improvements that will benefit Californians today and for decades to come," said Caltrans Director Cindy McKim.

The stated goal for the \$350,000 reserved for the Rodden Ranch is to protect key Central Valley foothill blue oak woodland, extensive wildlife corridor open space and historic grazing practices, according to a media release from Caltrans.

This donation, paired with a \$1 million award from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, puts the fundraising effort well on its way to protecting the Rodden Ranch.

"It's very exciting," said Erik Vink, project manager for the Trust for Public Land. "It gets us closer to raising the funds we need."

According to its mission statement, the conservancy, a state agency, "initiates, encourages and supports efforts that improve the environmental, economic and social wellbeing of the Sierra Nevada region, its communities and the citizens of California."

The 6,198-acre Rodden Ranch sits along the Calaveras-Stanislaus county line southwest of Copperopolis between Highway 4 and the Stanislaus River.

Three hundred of those acres are in Stanislaus County and would not be included in the conservation easement.

"At lower elevations, it is grassland," Vink said. "Then it rises in elevation to oak woodland."

"There is interest in protecting blue oak woodland throughout the state and the foothill belt of the Central Valley. That was the primary motivation for this particular property. It has excellent blue oak woodland and associated habitat on the ranch."

According to a grant application prepared by the Trust for Public Land, the land could also be the home of the endangered California red-legged frog and the tiger salamander that might live in seasonal creeks and ponds on the property.

A conservation easement is an agreement to preserve land between a landowner and a government agency or land trust.

In the case of the Rodden Ranch, the fair market value for the conservation easement is \$2,793,000.

"We can always purchase (the conservation easement) for less than that amount if the land owner is amenable," Vink said. "But we can pay no more than market value."

If the sale goes through, the land would be perpetually restricted from development.

"The restrictions will always be on the property, effectively devaluing the property because it can no longer be used for any non-agricultural use in the future," Vink said. "Any future owner would be bound by the same restrictions."

Once an easement is in place, landowners are not prohibited from agricultural activities.

"It certainly is a way for landowners to pull out some of the equity value of their property," Vink said. "They are giving

up something of real value in return. Part of the grant application submitted to the SNC stated that the Rodden Ranch is located in an area undergoing rapid conversion pressure and is near several golf course communities."

"To date, TPL has discussed funding with California Department of Fish and Game and Calaveras County," the application said. "Both agencies recognize the timely opportunity to acquire and protect working ranchland and an intact stand of mature blue oak woodland. TPL will seek funding commitments from those sources and other public and private sources to complete the project by Dec. 31, 2011."

"There are plenty of examples out there of properties that no one ever thought would be developed for 100 years that are entombed under asphalt and concrete today," Vink said. If all goes according to plan, the funds to purchase the conservation easement will be in place by the end of this year. For more information, or to donate to the effort, contact Vink at (530) 206-6962 or erik.vink@tpl.org.

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