California Farmland Conservancy Program

Focus on Farmland

Volume 8, Number 1

Newsletter of the CFCP
Spring/Summer 2010

This edition of Focus on Farmland features:

- Cooley Farms Easements Established in Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties
- CFCP Completes First Acquisition with Placer Legacy Project
- Running Deer Ranch Preserved in Napa County
- Commercial Solar Power Projects on Agricultural Land
- CFCP / DOC News Updates
- Other News and Upcoming Events

Cooley Farms Easements Established in Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties

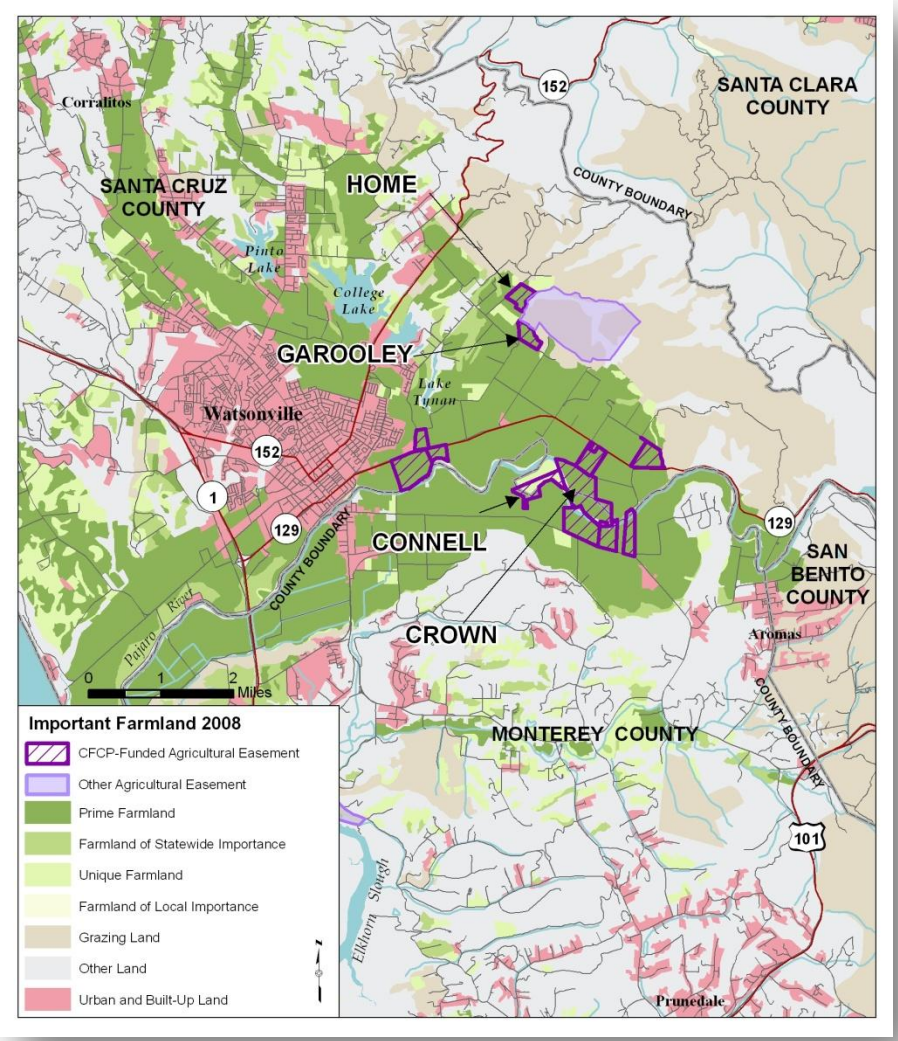
Strawberry harvest on the Connell Ranch, one of four farms preserved for agriculture by the Cooley family. Photo courtesy of Patty Stumpf.

Four productive farms totaling 364 acres in the heart of the Pajaro Valley have been permanently preserved for agriculture in a collaboration involving the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, the California Department of Conservation (DOC), and the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

The properties, owned by Don and Diane Cooley and the Cooley Family Trust, include the Connell, Crown, Garooley and Home farms. The first two straddle the Santa Cruz and Monterey county lines; the latter two are exclusively in Santa Cruz County. Ranging in size from 40 to 206 acres, the farms produce high-quality fruits and vegetables year-round, with raspberries and strawberries being particularly significant crops.

Through its California Farmland Conservancy Program (CFCP), DOC provided $1.3 million in Proposition 40 bond funds to help create the agricultural conservation easements. The NRCS contributed $389,500 through its Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program. This is the second group of conservation easements with which the two grant programs and the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County have collaborated to establish in the Pajaro Valley. With the new easements, there are now nearly 900 acres of Prime

Farmland shielded from development in this coastal valley. Development pressure in the area is influenced by nearby Watsonville and Pajaro. In addition, the properties are less than an hour commute to Santa Clara County and less than a 30 minute commute to the Monterey Peninsula, Salinas, and Santa Cruz.



The four Cooley properties – Home, Garooley, Connell, and Crown farms – encompass 364 acres of world-class farmland in both Santa Cruz and Monterey counties.

"There is significant development pressure in most of California's coastal valleys," DOC Director Bridgett Luther said. "This project presents an opportunity to further solidify the agricultural economy of the Pajaro Valley by adding, in one fell swoop, four additional farms to the growing group of permanently protected farms. This area rivals the Salinas Valley in terms of its productivity and desirability for agriculture."

Few families have deeper roots in the Pajaro Valley than Diane Porter Cooley's. She is a fifth-generation landowner in the area, and has ensured her family's future ties to the land by agreeing to place agricultural conservation easements on the four farms.

"My family has been farming here since 1851 and I'd like to see people continue to farm here," she said. "We want to help protect this beautiful and productive valley for future generations."

Diane Cooley is following in her parents' footsteps. In 1976 her parents, the Porters, donated a portion of the historic Las Lomas Ranch for conservation purposes. The balance of the 335-acre ranch was willed to the Elkhorn Slough Foundation in 2001. A year earlier the Cooley family donated a conservation easement on 684 acres of ranchland in the hills east of the valley. The family also donated 15 percent of the appraised value of the most recent easements (nearly $300,000) and will provide an endowment to help the Land Trust finance additional acquisitions and the costs associated with overseeing these easements.

Land Trust Executive Director Terry Corwin hailed the Cooley family for its leadership in protecting farmland, saying: "They are not only protecting their land, but they are also providing the Land Trust with the means to help protect additional farmland in the valley."

As of 2008, Monterey and Santa Cruz counties ranked No. 4 and No. 23, respectively, among California counties in total agricultural production. On a per acre basis Santa Cruz County possesses some of the

most productive farmland in the state. Despite the efforts of local government and organizations to preserve the agricultural heritage in these two counties, 5,213 acres of farmland and grazing land were reclassified to non-agricultural use from 2006 to 2008 in Monterey County according to DOC's Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program. For Santa Cruz County, that figure was 998 acres during the same timeframe.

About the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County: Formed in 1978 by local residents concerned about protecting the lands that make Santa Cruz County special, the Land Trust has protected more than 3,200 acres of land and worked with other organizations to protect another 9,000 acres. The trust protects both working lands, like farms and timberland, and natural lands with high conservation value – thus protecting water supplies, wildlife habitats, and open space. For more information, visit www.landtrustsantacruz.org.

CFCP Completes First Acquisition with Placer Legacy Project

The Natural Trading Company farm in Placer County grows forty different organic vegetable and fruit crops, cut flowers, nuts and vine crops.

The Placer Legacy Project of Placer County recently purchased an agricultural conservation easement on the 40-acre Natural Trading Company (NTC) farm with the help of a CFCP grant. The farm produces certified organic produce and maintains a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscription service, where members receive regular deliveries of fresh produce throughout the year.

The NTC moved to this farm in 2007 after successfully owning and expanding a twelve-and-a-half acre organic farm in Penryn. The previous owners of the newly protected farm owned the property since the 1950's and grew nineteen varieties of plums, several varieties of Asian pears, and persimmons. Since moving to the current location the NTC has improved the farm infrastructure, relocated one greenhouse, planted fifteen acres of row crops; and planted or rehabilitated seven acres of orchard. Forty different organic vegetable and fruit crops, cut flowers, nuts, and vine crops are grown on the farm. The NTC also grows six different types of sprouts in the greenhouse which are sold at four different supermarkets and natural food stores. Along with the CSA packages, NTC produce can be found at local farmers markets and local restaurants that provide organic fare.

The farm is on the urban fringe and consequently is near a significant amount of urban and rural ranchette growth. Within the last ten years, the area's farmland has faced tremendous threat of conversion. The farm is located two and a half miles from Lincoln and four miles from Auburn and near State Highway 193. Between 2004 and 2006, Lincoln added 1,080 acres of new residential and commercial development. According to DOC's Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, over 8,400 acres of farmland and grazing land were reclassified to non-agricultural use from 2006 to 2008 in Placer County.

Adopted in June 2000, Placer Legacy is a program of the County of Placer to protect and conserve open space and agricultural lands. The program was developed to implement the goals, policies, and programs of the 1994 Placer County General Plan including to "maintain a viable agricultural segment of the economy." Placer Legacy is a critical step toward protection, preservation, and restoration of the integrity, productivity, and biodiversity of the County's natural resources for this and future generations. This easement represents the second agricultural easement under the Legacy Program. In conjunction with the Placer Legacy Program, the NTC has been highlighted on the Placer Trails and PlacerGrown programs.

The CFCP and the Placer Legacy Project provided $692,327 in funding to purchase the agricultural conservation easement. Placer County, under the Placer Legacy Program, will hold the easement and perform annual monitoring of the property.

Running Deer Ranch Preserved in Napa County

An old oak stands sentry over Lake Berryessa on the Running Deer Ranch in Napa County.

The California Rangeland Trust (CRT), with financial assistance from the CFCP and United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), has purchased an agricultural conservation easement on a 1,275-acre portion of the Running Deer Ranch in Napa County. The ranch is located on the east shore of Lake Berryessa, approximately 22 miles north of the City of Napa. It spans over 3,000 acres and is part of the historic Las Putas Rancho acquired by the Berryessa brothers in 1843. The agricultural conservation easement now protects one of the oldest working ranches in the state from rural development or subdivision. The landowners felt motivated to protect the ranch as development continued to edge closer, and will seek to place the remainder of the ranch under a conservation easement.

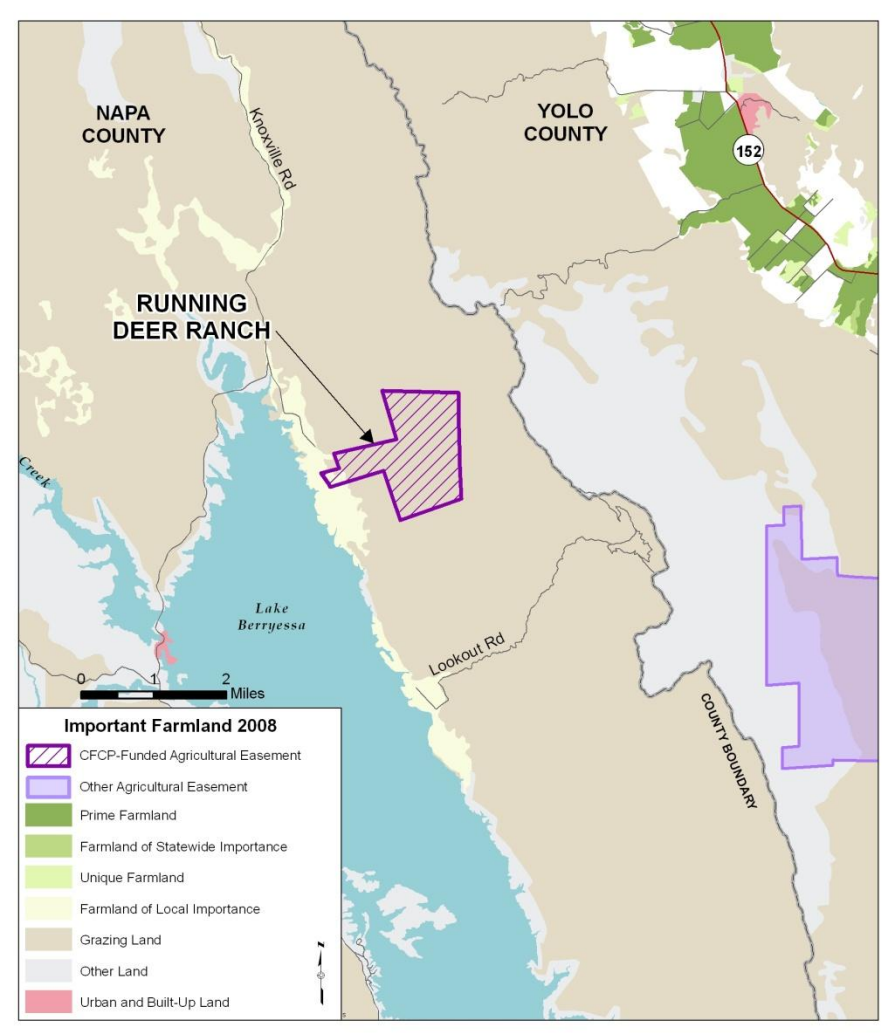
"The average private landowner does not have the resources to ensure their land remains in agriculture, open and healthy forever. Since we began the effort of this easement project, there has been fragmentation of property on our borders to build ranchettes," said John Ahmann, who owns the ranch with his wife Judy. "Without this conservation easement our land would eventually go the way of development, and this natural place and its history would be gone."

Under the terms of the agricultural conservation easement, the development rights have been extinguished and the land can never be subdivided. CRT paid the appraised value of $900,000 for the easement. The Department of Conservation and NRCS provided grants to CRT of $450,000 each for the project.

Cattle have been grazed on the property for over 150 years. Before the Ahmanns purchased the property in 1986 it was used for seasonal grazing of stocker steers. The Ahmanns use the ranch as a cow-calf operation and started a program of fall grazing of calves from their grazing operation in Oregon. This grazing continues through May or June depending on forage production.

The ranch also operates a purebred herd of Romagnola cows. Stocking rates vary from year to year based on rainfall and resulting forage production. In one recent good year, the ranch ran 158 cow-calf pairs, which would be typical in an average-to-good rainfall year. The ranch produces its own hay in order to limit the introduction of noxious weeds. Some hay is also grown offsite on the family's Dixon property, also to ensure quality control and minimize the possibility of introducing invasive weeds.

The CRT, a 501(c)(3) public benefit corporation, was founded in 1998 to conserve the open space, natural habitat and stewardship provided by California's ranches. To date, CRT has protected over 200,000 acres of productive grazing lands throughout California. For more information, please visit www.rangelandtrust.org.



Running Deer Ranch is located on the east shore of Lake Berryessa, approximately 22 miles north of the City of Napa. An agricultural conservation easement now preserves 1,275 acres of the historic 3,000-acre ranch.

Commercial Solar Power Projects on Agricultural Land

Interest in the development of solar power infrastructure is more keen than ever before. Likewise, the pressure to bring solar development to fruition is also growing due to tax incentives offered by the federal government. California's agricultural lands are often considered to be good sites for solar facilities due to established vehicular access to these lands, abundant sunshine, and the land's previous "disturbed" (tilled, planted, etc.) status, which can minimize concerns for the impacts upon endangered species. Some of those same lands may no longer be suitable for irrigation due to the lack of sufficient water, salinity, poor drainage, or other reasons.

Development of commercial solar infrastructure on certain agricultural lands may make sense, especially where the long-term agricultural productivity of the land is questionable. Some talk of

"harvesting the sun," as opposed to harvesting crops. Going further, some even say that harvesting crops is already a form of harvesting the sun's energy, so why not cut out the middle process of growing and processing the vegetation? Think of ethanol grown to supplant or replace fossil fuels.

But what if the agricultural land being considered for solar development is restricted in its use? Here in California much of the agricultural land in the State is subject to the Williamson Act, and therefore subject to use restrictions dictated by the Act, local rules, and contract terms specific to the property. In general, under the Williamson Act use of land must be either agricultural or compatible with agricultural use. Commercial solar development is not generally compatible while Williamson Act contracts are still in effect. More thorny still would be land subject to an agricultural conservation easement such as those funded by the CFCP. Such easements typically restrict the non-agricultural use of land in perpetuity, and require new structures and non-agricultural improvements to be placed within defined building envelopes.

A landowner with farmland restricted by an agricultural conservation easement who is considering some form of commercial solar development on his or her land would be wise to look to the specific language of the agricultural conservation easement in effect, and consider the scope and nature of the solar usage contemplated. The landowner should also meet with the holder of the easement to discuss acceptable and unacceptable situations. County farm bureaus may also take a position on the issue, as may government agencies or nonprofit organizations which may have provided funding for the conservation easement. For those landowners just beginning negotiations in a conservation easement transaction, pay special attention to the "retained rights" section of the easement's language, the easement's provisions for new structures and improvements, as well as the baseline documentation describing the agricultural productivity of the land.

CFCP / DOC News Updates:

Annual Monitoring Reports Due to CFCP Soon: For organizations holding easements acquired with CFCP funding, annual monitoring reports for each easement are due by June 30. A one-page letter describing the method of monitoring and the condition of the property is sufficient. A sample form called the CFCP Annual Monitoring Report Form is available on the CFCP website.

Update on CFCP's Proposition 40-funded grants: To date, the CFCP has completed over 30 agricultural conservation easement and planning grants across the state using Proposition 40 bond funds. The details of these acquisitions – including photos and maps – are available for viewing on the CFCP Website. This growing list of completed projects will be updated periodically.

Upcoming Events:

Trends in Agricultural Land & Lease Values: The California Chapter of the American Society of Farm Managers & Rural Appraisers (ASFMRA) has released its 2010 issue of Trends in Agricultural Land & Lease Values. The annual publication is a source for agricultural land value data in California and a resource tool for the industry. Historical information is included in each issue of Trends going back an average of six years. Regional editorial overviews that provide background information for the charts and graphs are included as well as a glossary of terms for those who might be unfamiliar with some of the verbiage used in the reporting.

Print copies of the 94 page, 4 color land values reference guide for California and Nevada may be purchased online or through the chapter office. For more information, please visit: www.calasfmra.com.

The Land Trust Alliance's Rally 2010: Mark your calendars for the National Land Conservation Conference in Hartford, Connecticut, from October 2-5. The Rally 2010 brochure will be available in the spring. For more information please visit: www.landtrustalliance.org/training/rally/rally.

The California Farmland Conservancy Program, administered by Department of Conservation's Division of Land Resource Protection, is designed to ensure that the state's most valuable farmland can be preserved. Through the program, local governments and nonprofit organizations can receive grants to purchase development rights from willing landowners, thus creating permanent conservation easements.

We hope you've found this issue of *Focus on Farmland* useful and informative. Please contact us with any questions or ideas you have for future editions. Feel free to forward this email to other interested parties.

If you wish to be added to or removed from this mailing list, email cfcp@conservation.ca.gov.

California Farmland Conservancy Program

Manager: Charles Tyson
(916) 324-0850
cfcp@conservation.ca.gov

Department of Conservation
801 K Street, MS 18-01
Sacramento, CA 95814
www.conservation.ca.gov