



DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION

Managing California's Working Lands

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STATE, FEDERAL FUNDING HELPS CHICO-BASED LAND TRUST PERMANENTLY SHIELD BUTTE COUNTY FARM FROM DEVELOPMENT

CHICO – George Nicolaus, a transplanted Iowan, has a great deal of pride in California agriculture. Mention nuts and he'll tell you that California produces most of the world's almonds and almost all the nation's walnuts – two crops he grows on his property right outside Chico's urban growth control boundary.

"The Green Line separates agriculture from urban development, and it's been controversial over the years," Nicolaus said. "But the older I get, the more I recognize that there's only so much good dirt to grow things in."

That's why Nicolaus worked with the Northern California Regional Land Trust to create an agricultural conservation easement on his 145-acre Comanche Creek Farm. Funding to permanently shield the property from development was provided by the California Department of Conservation's California Farmland Conservancy Program (CFCP) and the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP), part of the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Nicolaus moved to California after spending time in the service and "discovering winters could be different than in Iowa." He married a fourth-generation Chico native, the former Connie Chace, whose maternal family, the Crawfords, have deep agricultural roots in the area. The Nicolaus family purchased an orchard on the west side of Chico in 1988 and the Comanche Creek Farm in 2005.

"A lot of agricultural land around here has been broken up into 20-acre parcels," Nicolaus said. "I saw that potential for this property. I understand the appeal of living on a ranchette, but with that size parcel, agriculture isn't sustainable. A few people have questioned my decision. They think I've taken away my children's right to develop this property. Maybe, but I don't want to grow houses. We have some great soil, and if you take care of it, it's going to be productive forever. That's what I'm leaving my children."

The Comanche Creek Farm is located just southwest of Chico, four-tenths of a mile from the city's

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sphere of influence and adjacent to a riparian area. Despite the presence of the aforementioned Green Line, leapfrog development and urbanization continue to be a threat in the unincorporated areas.

“By conserving farmland between Chico and the Sacramento River and bolstering the Chico Green Line with a permanent agricultural easement, we couldn’t be happier about the outcomes of this project and the new conservation partner we have in Mr. Nicolaus,” said Jamison Watts, executive director of the Northern California Regional Land Trust.

According to the state’s Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program, farm and grazing lands decreased by more than 35,000 acres in Butte County between 1988 and 2008. Agricultural production in the county fell from nearly \$580 million in 2008 to \$544 million in 2009.

“We’re very pleased to have helped permanently preserve the Comanche Creek Farm for agriculture, particularly since this is our program’s first project in the Chico area,” Department of Conservation (DOC) Acting Director Derek Chernow said. “We hope other landowners in Butte County will explore the easement option for their own properties.”

Added Ed Burton, NRCS California State Conservationist: “We are proud to have partnered with the land trust and DOC to preserve such an important piece of land in Northern California. This property will remain healthy and productive for generations to come.”

About the Department of Conservation’s California Farmland Conservancy Program: Begun in 1996, the CFCP has provided nearly \$70 million in funding to permanently shield more than 49,000 acres of the state’s best and most vulnerable agricultural land from development. Landowners and trusts are encouraged to contact the Division of Land Resource Protection for information about the program and potential funding. For details, visit www.conservation.ca.gov/dlrp.

About the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s (NRCS) Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP): The federal FRPP is a voluntary easement program that protects productive agricultural land by providing funds for the purchase of conservation easements to limit conversion of farm and ranch lands to non-agricultural uses. NRCS partners with state, tribal or local governments, and non-governmental organizations to fund the acquisition of conservation easements or other interests in land from landowners. More information is available at www.ca.nrcs.usda.gov.

About the Northern California Regional Land Trust (NCRLT): The NCRLT was founded in 1990 to assist Northern California landowners and public agencies in the voluntary protection of land and other natural resources. It currently holds 19 conservation easements protecting more than 14,000 acres in Butte and Tehama counties. For more information, visit <http://www.landconservation.org/>.

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