



FOR RELEASE July 5, 2011

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Valuable Lompoc Farmland Conserved By Voluntary Agreement

(Santa Barbara, CA) – On June 29, 2011 the Hibbits Ranch on the eastern edge of the City of Lompoc was permanently dedicated to agriculture through a voluntary conservation agreement with the Land Trust for Santa Barbara County. By placing an agricultural conservation easement on this 394-acre farm, the Land Trust and the Hibbits family have committed to keep this land – featuring some of the best soils in the county – in agricultural use in perpetuity.

If you have driven on Highway 246 from Buellton into Lompoc, you have seen the sunlight flickering through the big walnut groves and the farm fields stretching to the Santa Rita Hills on the Hibbits Ranch. Three generations of the Hibbits family have farmed the Lompoc Valley, building a diverse and successful farming operation run today by Art and Sherry Hibbits. Their ranch features prime topsoil over thirty feet deep in places and has supported a wide array of nuts, vegetables, seed crops as well as cattle grazing for over a century. The hilly back part of the ranch features a small oak woodland and drainages that provide valuable habitat to a variety of birds and mammals.

Art Hibbits, managing partner of the Hibbits Ranch Company, said of the agreement, “*Our family’s goals in pursuing this easement were to protect and encourage the continued agricultural uses on the ranch in a long term, sustainable manner. We want future generations to have flexibility in future choices of crops, equipment and farming practices. Our agreement with the Land Trust clearly states these goals.*”

Hibbits also noted philosophically, *“A hundred or two hundred years from now I hope people will say that we had the foresight to make sure this farmland didn’t fall victim to sprawl.”*

The agricultural conservation easement is a deed restriction held by the non-profit Land Trust for Santa Barbara County, which has protected thirty-seven properties covering 22,300 acres through voluntary transactions with local landowners. Land Trust projects include valuable wildlife habitat, working farms and ranches and community nature preserves. The conservation easement eliminates the possibility that the ranch could be converted to residential or commercial development. The land remains a private working farm, pays property taxes and may be sold, with the conservation easement

Farmland conservation grants totaling \$2.4 million were awarded to the project by the California Farmland Conservancy Program and the USDA Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program. The Land Trust raised local foundation grants and private donations to complete the purchase. The Hibbits family donated a portion of the value as a landowner match to the grants. The value of a conservation easement is determined by an independent real estate appraisal.

The Hibbits Ranch is the largest property in a block of farm land that is the scenic gateway to La Purisima Mission State Historic Park. Conserving high quality farm and ranch land is a priority of the Land Trust and the grant agencies that supported this project.

“Local support was very important to securing these highly competitive grants,” noted Michael Feeney, Land Trust executive director. *“We had the unanimous support of the County Board of Supervisors plus letters of support from the Santa Barbara County Farm Bureau, State Parks and our state legislators Tony Strickland and Sam Blakeslee.”*

California Department of Conservation acting director Derek Chernow stated, *“We’re very pleased to be involved in permanently shielding the Hibbits Ranch from development. This is a wonderful agricultural property, and we congratulate the landowners, the Land Trust for Santa Barbara County, and our federal funding partners on the completion of this project. Our hope is that other landowners in the area will take note and explore this option for their own properties.”*

“We are proud to have partnered on protecting this beautiful and prosperous land for generations to come,” said Ed Burton, NRCS California State Conservationist. *“This farm’s rich and healthy soil is an agricultural treasure in the County and the landscape provides critical habitat for a diverse set of wildlife.”*

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. The state also offers programs that provide financial incentives to keep land in agricultural use for periods of 10 and 20 years. For details, visit www.conservation.ca.gov/dlrp.

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