



Marin Agricultural Land Trust Permanently Preserves Thousand-Acre West Marin Ranch

Nine-year effort protects sixth-generation Thornton Ranch. Purchase of \$2.3 million easement keeps livestock ranch operational and completes 8,000-acre greenbelt of MALT-protected farmland near historic ranching town of Tomales.

Point Reyes Station, CA ([PRWEB](#)) August 15, 2011 -- After nine years, the most complicated conservation project in the 30-year history of Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT) is finally complete. MALT, with financial help from the USDA, the California Department of Conservation, and generous private donors, has permanently protected the 1,013-acre Thornton Ranch in western Marin County. This ranch completes an 8,000-acre greenbelt of MALT-protected farmland that surrounds the historic town of Tomales and reaches to the shores of Tomales Bay.

The story of MALT's protection of the Thornton Ranch spans almost an entire decade. Gary Thornton inherited the ranch in 2000, after his father died unexpectedly. Selling the family's dairy herd to pay the estate taxes did not make enough to cover the entire IRS bill, so Gary sought MALT's assistance. "I first met Gary Thornton in MALT co-founder Ellen Straus' kitchen in 2002," said Robert Berner, Executive Director at MALT. But MALT's easement purchase was stalled by an adverse IRS ruling related to an alternative valuation of his father's estate: Gary Thornton, technically the ranch's new owner, faced a stiff tax penalty if he sold any part of the property—even a conservation easement—before the 10-year anniversary of his father's death and Thornton's inheritance of the ranch. Nevertheless, MALT continued working with Thornton, devising innovative financing solutions to survive the 10-year period—and an economic recession—to keep the ranch in active, commercial agriculture. Now the wait is over, and MALT has finally been able to purchase a conservation easement, protecting the agricultural and natural resources of the ranch forever.

The funds from this sale will allow Thornton to pay off the estate taxes, continue to raise beef and sheep, and, most importantly, keep his family on the ranch—where it has been for over 150 years and six generations. Daughter Marissa, who recently graduated from Chico State University with a degree in Animal Science, plans to stay on the property and continue the family's ranching tradition, with an eye towards rebuilding the family dairy and making cheese.

This fertile coastal rangeland is now protected from subdivision and non-agricultural development—forever. "We are delighted that we were able to complete this transaction and help ensure the property will stay in the family and remain an important part of Marin's agricultural landscape and legacy for generations to come," says Berner. Gary Thornton added, "If there was no MALT, the ranch would be sold by now. It's as simple as that."

Funding for the \$2,329,500 project, MALT's 68th conservation easement, came from a combination of state, federal and private sources: The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service granted \$810,000, the Department of Conservation (DOC)'s California Farmland Conservancy Program provided \$480,000, and the remaining \$1,039,500 came from MALT's donors and supporters.

"We are proud to have contributed toward permanently shielding the Thornton Ranch from development," said DOC's Acting Director, Derek Chernow. "Congratulations to the landowners, our federal funding partners, and especially to MALT, for showing perseverance, patience and dedication in seeing this project through to



completion.”

Marin Agricultural Land Trust (MALT) is a member-supported nonprofit organization created in 1980 by a coalition of ranchers and environmentalists to preserve farmland in Marin County, California. With financial support from individuals, public agencies and private foundations, MALT has permanently protected nearly half of the working farm and ranch land in Marin County. MALT also encourages public policies that support and enhance agriculture. Visit www.malt.org for more information.

U.S. Department of Agriculture 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.

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About the Department of Conservation's California Farmland Conservancy Program: Begun in 1996, the CFCP has provided nearly \$70.5 million in funding to permanently shield more than 49,300 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.

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