

Trust protects more Wasco farmland from development

Courtenay Edelhart, Bakersfield Californian, 2-22-12

WASCO -- A host of civic and business leaders gathered Wednesday to celebrate the expansion of a trust that permanently shields a large swath of Wasco farmland from development.

The Sequoia Riverlands Trust is a conservation program that uses public and private money to protect farmland, ranch land and natural habitat.

Two years ago, the trust acquired an easement that prevented 472 acres of farmland in Wasco from being converted to non-agricultural use, the first such acquisition ever in Kern County. This week, the adjoining 571 acres also were added to the trust.

Both properties are owned by Wasco 1 Real Properties, an agricultural partnership between Keith Gardiner, Holly King and members of their extended families.

"We were all born and raised in farming," King said at a dedication ceremony on the land, which is located on Kimberlina Road west of Highway 99. "It's a quality of life that is important to us. It expresses the values that we have as a family, and we've always believed that the world needs food, and we need farmland to produce it."

All property ownership comes with a set of rights that can be sold all at once when land changes hands, or individually. It may have water rights, mineral rights, development rights and other assets.

The Sequoia Riverlands Trust is a nonprofit organization based in Visalia that acquires development rights to land in Kern, Fresno, King and Tulare counties.

"We purchase the development rights and then extinguish them," said President Scott Spear. "There's no secondary market."

The arrangement, then, isn't like the Williamson Act, which is a contract preventing farmers from developing their land for a given period of time -- usually 10 years -- and receive a break on property taxes in return.

"This is a permanent obligation," said Don Drysdale, a spokesman for the California Department of Conservation. "Once you're in, you're committed."

The trust gets funding for easements from private donors and state and federal agencies. In all cases, land owners sell their rights voluntarily.

The California Department of Conservation's Farmland Conservancy Program paid the Wasco partnership nearly \$2.9 million for the first easement two years ago, and joined forces with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program to pay more than \$1 million for the latest easement.

That wasn't enough for the value of the rights, so the owners donated another \$1.02 million to the cause, which Gardiner said will help offset capital gains taxes.

The size of the payments was determined by subtracting the value of development rights from the overall value of the land, Spear said.

The Wasco partnership retains other forms of ownership of the land and is free to plant whatever it chooses. At the moment, both farms primarily are planted with almonds.

The trust will regularly inspect the land, which once was owned by President Herbert Hoover, to make sure it's not surreptitiously taken out of food production.

Some limited building is allowed under the terms of the agreement. A farmhouse would be permitted, or a farm store. But anything that does not "enhance the ability to produce food" would not be allowed, Spear said.

The state's Farmland Conservancy Program has provided \$77.4 million in funding to protect 52,293 acres of vulnerable farmland from development since the program began in 1996.

"Most people don't appreciate how important agriculture is to Kern County, so it's really important that we protect it," said Ben McFarland, executive director of the Kern County Farm Bureau.

The gross value of all agricultural commodities produced in Kern was almost \$4.8 billion in 2010, according to the Kern County Department of Agriculture and Measurement Standards.

Even though the families that own the land in Wasco had no plans to take it out of production, the acreage was considered at risk because the property could potentially have been split into so-called ranchettes for people working in Bakersfield but desiring a rural homestead, Spear said. There are estate-sized lots of 10 to 20 acres south of Wasco and north of Shafter.

"We're not anti-development, we're pro-farmland," Spear said. "We work with nearby city jurisdictions to go where they're not going to go."

Gardiner said he'll use the easement money to pay down debt and mitigate against the risks inherent in farming.

"The main thing is to make sure this land is here for future generations," he said. "This is great property. Good land, good water, good soil."