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Apple Orchard in Pajaro Valley Permanently Protected from Development

Tradition has kept three generations of the Pista family farming in the Pajaro Valley and a conservation deal will keep that tradition going. Landowners Mark and Carol Pista placed an agricultural conservation easement on their 75-acre apple orchard, Pista Farmlands, ensuring the property will stay in farming forever.

The Land Trust of Santa Cruz County purchased the easement with a \$267,250 grant from the Department of Conservation's California Farmland Conservancy Program (CFCP) and with individual donations to the Land Trust towards its campaign to protect 10,000 acres by the end of 2012.

"I want farming to stay in Watsonville area and the Pajaro Valley and placing an easement on Pista Farmlands is a good way to make sure that happens. It's a responsible action on our part." Mark Pista said the sale of the conservation easement will help cover the cost of doing business, while shielding the property from future development. The project will keep the property in private hands and on the county tax rolls.

Given that the property is separated by one parcel from the City of Watsonville, without a conservation easement the property may have been considered for development. The conservation easement will safeguard Pista Farmlands' agricultural viability and scenic attributes, all of which contribute to the agricultural and rural character of the Watsonville Community.

Mark Pista's grandfather moved from Croatia in 1896 and at that time began farming in apples and apricots in Natividad in the Salinas Valley. "My family started farming the current property in 1919, and I have been farming Pista Farmlands since I came out of the Navy in 1970."

"I enjoy the crop very much, and the process of planting the trees and watching them grow," says Mark Pista. The Newtown pippin apples grown on Pista Farmlands go primarily to the Martinelli Company, a Watsonville-based juice and cider maker.

The Land Trust has already protected over 2,000 acres of farm and ranch land in the Pajaro Valley. The non-profit holds conservation easements on farms owned by Don and Diane Cooley, the Borina Foundation, and Randy Repass and Sally-Christine Rogers. The Land Trust owns 485 acres of farmland and wetlands near the Watsonville Sloughs.

The protection of the Pista Farmlands is part of the Land Trust's recently announced campaign to protect 10,000 acres by the end of 2012, including the former CEMEX forest lands above Davenport and Star Creek Ranch in the Pajaro Hills east of Watsonville. The Land Trust is seeking to raise \$13.5 million in local funds to complete these transactions and has already raised more than \$11 million. Local gifts will be multiplied by more than \$26 million in outside funds, including government and foundation grants.

“We’re pleased to help protect this outstanding orchard,” said Brian Leahy, head of DOC’s Division of Land Resource Protection, which administers the CFCP. “We congratulate the Pista family and the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County on the creation of this conservation easement and encourage other local landowners to explore the easement option for their property.”

About the Department of Conservation’s California Farmland Conservancy Program:

Since 1996, the CFCP has provided \$77.4 million in funding to permanently shield more than 52,000 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 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 11,700 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.