

SOLANO COUNTY

Untamed land preserved

Regional park advocates' dream is 4,000 acres closer to reality

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Perched between the fast-spreading cities north of the Carquinez Strait is a vast region of rolling, grassy hills and valleys where coyotes roam. It is an expanse of oak woodlands, wetlands and serpentine rock outcroppings that is largely untrammled by humans.

For two decades, as bulldozers have carved out suburban housing tracts in Vallejo, Benicia and Fairfield, preservation groups have been working to protect nearly 15,000 acres of contiguous land, much of which open-space advocates hope to turn into a spectacular regional park on par with those in the East Bay, in Marin and on the Peninsula.

The latest piece, part of what is known as the Sky Valley-Cordelia Hills Open Space, is a 4,000-acre expanse that the nonprofit Solano Land Trust finished purchasing recently from Pacific Gas and Electric Co.

"It's as beautiful as it gets," said Bob Berman, a founding director of the Solano Land Trust, which was formed in 1986 as part of a settlement of a lawsuit challenging development in northern Fairfield.

"You think you are 1,000 miles away from the Bay Area," he said. "On a clear day, in winter, from the peaks you can see all the way to the Sierra."

To promote public knowledge of the land and generate support for public management, the Solano Land Trust offers free docent-led walks, mountain bicycle rides and horse rides in several areas about once a month. About 250 people visited the Sky Valley-Cordelia Hills Open Space last year.

Berman was instrumental in persuading the cities of Benicia, Fairfield and Vallejo and Solano County in 1992 to adopt a policy of trying to preserve 10,000 acres of land in the hills to prevent the possible merging of the three cities' boundaries.

In the late 1980s, the city of Vallejo was working to annex land in the same hills for what became Hiddenbrooke, an isolated, golf-centered development of 1,200 homes in a valley near American Canyon and Interstate 80. Today, the development remains surrounded by open space.

"Those hills would have been developed but for this preservation effort," said Harry Pollack, a conservation attorney who advised the Solano Land Trust on its acquisition efforts for six years.

Solano County's population has mushroomed from 241,900 in 1981 to 416,500 last year. Today, Benicia and Vallejo nearly meet near the Carquinez Strait, separated by a small open-space buffer.

The Solano Land Trust closed escrow in January on the \$5.1 million deal for the two PG&E properties -- the 1,408-acre Eastern Swett Ranch and the 905-acre Vallejo Swett Ranch. In 2002, PG&E sold the land trust the contiguous 1,575-acre King Ranch along the Suisun Marsh by Interstate 680 for about \$3 million.

The land purchases were made possible in part by a \$2.1 million grant from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation of San Francisco, \$1 million from the state Wildlife Conservation Board and \$500,000 from the state Coastal Conservancy, which gave almost all the money for the King Ranch.



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PG&E, which bought the ranches for possible siting of windmill generators, is credited with giving the land trust a \$900,000 discount, repeatedly extending purchase options and declining to update their land appraisals. The utility is working with the Solano Land Trust on ways to improve wildlife habitat on the properties.

Now that the land trust owns the land, the focus of local planning efforts has shifted to the question of how to make it publicly accessible while maintaining cattle grazing and without damaging wildlife habitat.

The area hosts rare, threatened and endangered animals and plants including the California red-legged frog and a lily called dwarf soaproot, as well as eagles, hawks and owls.

"The challenge is to make it so people can come out and enjoy it," said Brenda Gillarde, a principal planner for city of Benicia.

The Bay Area Ridge Trail Council has included the properties as part of its projected 400-mile ridge trail around the Bay Area. When combined with 700 acres preserved around Hiddenbrooke and a 1,039-acre ranch the land trust purchased north of I-80 in the mid-1990s, the recent purchases could make it possible to walk from the Suisun Marsh all the way to Napa County.

Discussions have focused on the possibility of creating a regional park district -- an idea opposed by some who think another governmental entity is undesirable -- or expanding the role of the Solano County parks division, which currently manages a total of 225 acres.

Meanwhile, local activists and government officials are continuing their efforts to protect thousands more acres of the Sky Valley-Cordelia Hills area from development.

The Land Trust and local government agencies are interested in buying a nearly 2,000-acre parcel owned by the city of Santa Clara's power utility, which bought the land in the mid-1980s for a possible wind farm but tabled its plans after objections from local officials and residents.

Benicia has independently appointed a Sky Valley open space committee to investigate ways to give permanent protection to roughly 4,000 acres of watershed north of Lake Herman Road. Back in the mid-1990s, a housing developer sought to build in the area but was stopped by public opposition.

In 2003, Benicia voters approved a growth boundary barring urban development north of Lake Herman Road, county land within Benicia's sphere of influence and thus a potential direction for city expansion.

Pollack, the conservation attorney who has helped put together the Solano land purchases, compared the conservation effort to the creation of Tilden Regional Park, which borders Berkeley and Kensington in the East Bay.

"Those of us who live in Berkeley sing the praises of those who had the foresight to put that land aside for future generations," he said.

Solano open space

For information on hikes, mountain bike rides, wildlife tours, school field trips and other activities, and to volunteer for trail work or habitat restoration, go to www.solanolandtrust.org/activities.html.

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