

California scenic coastal expanse preserved near Santa Cruz

Paul Rogers, San Jose Mercury News, 4-14-14

Cementing protection for one of the largest privately owned pieces of land on California's 1,100-mile coastline, a San Francisco environmental group on Monday donated to the public the Coast Dairies property -- a pastoral expanse of rolling meadows, redwood forests and panoramic ocean views north of Santa Cruz.

"We are enormously pleased that generations from now it is going to look the way it does today," said Will Rogers, president of the Trust for Public Land, which transferred the property to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

The 5,843-acre ranch eight miles north of Santa Cruz was the subject of years of battles, even among environmental groups.

Marked with rows of artichokes and Brussels sprouts along its edges on Highway 1, the property was owned for more than a century by two Swiss families who acquired it in the 1860s and joined holdings in 1902. It had been coveted for development since the 1970s, when PG&E acquired an option on it with plans to build a nuclear power plant near Davenport, and more recently, in the 1990s, when former Nevada developer Brian Sweeney attempted to carve it into 139 lots for luxury homes.

The property was preserved in its bucolic state in 1998, when the Save-the-Redwoods League acquired it for \$44.5 million, most of which came from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation in Los Altos.

By the end of this year, two trails should be open to the public for hiking, said Rick Cooper, field manager with the BLM office in Hollister. One, known as Liddell Creek Trail, is off Bonny Doon Road. The other, the Molina Pasture Trail, is off Swanton Road.

"This property has redwood forests and creeks. It's a spectacular area for the public to get a true recreational experience, hiking up the terraces," Cooper said. "And looking back over the ocean, it's a great view."

Some environmentalists would like the property to become a national monument. For that, there is recent precedent.

Last month, President Barack Obama designated an area on the rugged Mendocino County coast, the 1,656-acre Point Arena-Stornetta parcel, as part of the California Coastal Monument, a preserve established by President Bill Clinton and overseen by the BLM.

Similarly in 2012, Obama designated 14,000 acres of Fort Ord, the former military base north of Monterey, as a national monument run by the BLM. In both monuments, oil and gas drilling is banned.

Language in the deed transferred Monday bans any commercial logging on the property. The Trust for Public Land also retained the mineral rights, blocking mining or fracking.

Cooper said that the BLM will develop, with public involvement, a long-term plan over the next two years. Uses probably will include hiking, horse riding and mountain biking, he said. Until the first two trails open, the lands remain closed to the public, he said, and BLM rangers will patrol it.

Like many major land-use issues around Monterey Bay, the preservation of Coast Dairies came with controversy. After Save-the-Redwoods League acquired the property, it transferred control to the Trust for Public Land, a larger national organization. The trust expected at first to donate the property to a public agency within two or three years after surveying its plants and animals and completing a use plan.

But when it opened up the planning process to community groups, the trust faced a barrage of competing interests from surfers to off-road motorcyclists to local residents concerned about everything from traffic to increased fire risk.

By 2004, the plan was finished. The trust donated 407 oceanfront acres to the California state parks department in 2006. But that land, a stunning mix of beaches and rugged cliffs, was all the state parks could take given tight budgets.

The BLM, which agreed to take most of the inland acres, didn't want to manage the row crops and farmers along the coast. So the trust planned to divide 740 acres and keep ownership, leasing it to farmers. But then local environmental groups fought to require the trust to get coastal commission permission for that. The groups wanted more protections locked into the deal, and the commission eventually granted a permit in 2012.

"Obama won't be president forever. The BLM changes based on administrations," said Bill Parkin, a Santa Cruz attorney who represented several of the local groups. "Making sure that the land has the appropriate protections on it was important."

The local groups, the Rural Bonny Doon Association and former Santa Cruz Mayor Celia Scott among them, also sued, alleging that the trust violated state law regulating how properties are subdivided. A county judge ruled against the groups in October.

"The community wanted to make sure there weren't going to be dune buggies and logging and oil wells out there," said Santa Cruz County Supervisor Neal Coonerty.

"Today is fantastic. It's been a long, long battle," he added. "The north coast was under threat for a long time, and through the efforts of a lot of people, it is going to be preserved and protected for our children and grandchildren."