



**LAND
TRUST**
OF SANTA CRUZ
COUNTY

Rare Wetlands Protected

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The heart of Santa Cruz County's largest freshwater wetlands was permanently protected this week when the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County acquired 440 acres west of Watsonville at the center of the Watsonville Sloughs system.

Land Trust Executive Director Terry Corwin said the protection of the property has been a priority for conservationists in the county for years. "When I was hired four years ago," Corwin said, "I was repeatedly told that the permanent protection of this land was the highest conservation priority in the county. And now, it's done!"

The 440 acre acquisition lies between 350 acres of wetlands and upland habitat already protected by state and federal agencies, creating an 800 acre block of protected land at the heart of the Watsonville Sloughs system. 90% of California's wetlands have been lost since intensive human settlement began with the Gold Rush. The few that remain provide rare habitat for a vast array of birds and other animals and protect water quality and the health of Monterey Bay.

The Watsonville Sloughs system is made up of six sloughs that drain a 12 mile watershed that stretches into the City of Watsonville and up into Larkin Valley. The overlap of wetlands, marsh, and grasslands creates a diverse ecosystem that provides rare foraging, nesting, and breeding habitats for wildlife, including five federally-listed species and 16 state-listed species of special concern.

The Land Trust's purchase and permanent protection of the land was set for completion in January, but the state funding freeze put it on hold for the past nine months. \$12 million of Proposition 84 bond funds approved by the voters in 2006 could not be issued until now, forcing the Land Trust to scramble to keep the deal alive.

"We almost lost this project many times," said Corwin. In January the Peninsula Open Space Trust agreed to acquire part of the property and then resell it to the Land Trust when state funds were released. That finally happened this week.

The state bond funds came in the form of \$6.5 million in grants from state Coastal Conservancy and \$5.5 million from the Wildlife Conservation Board. The remaining \$1.7 million of the acquisition cost came from The Nature Conservancy from a fund established to protect high-priority habitats on California's Central Coast.

The transaction includes 58 acres of wetland and 383 acres of organic farmland. The Land Trust will use revenue from leasing the land for stewardship, restoration, and education work. Corwin said the Land Trust will work with the Resources Conservation District, Watsonville Wetlands Watch and the Fitz Wetlands Educational Resource Center at Pajaro Valley High School on restoration and education projects. Corwin said the first restoration project will begin next month, restoring red-legged frog habitat.

"This project is a great example of what the voters approved when they passed Proposition 84," Corwin said. "It protects wetlands, farm land, water quality, and provides funding for ongoing stewardship and restoration. I'm relieved the money has finally been used as the voters intended."

Corwin said that the Land Trust's acquisition was the culmination of years of work by many people and organizations to protect these wetlands. The Nature Conservancy identified it as a top priority years ago. Federal and state agencies stepped in to protect 350 acres. The area west of Watsonville was excluded from the urban growth boundary under Watsonville's historic Measure U. The deal that led to the building of Pajaro Valley High added additional protection by the county, the state, and the Coastal Commission. Corwin said the Land Trust is working on protecting additional land in the Watsonville Sloughs. "The sloughs are a rare and precious resource," she said, "And we are interested in protecting – and caring for – as much of it as possible."

"This remarkable property has not only been protected forever," Corwin said, "but we now have the ability to take care of it forever too."