Habitat Protected for HWY 17 Wildlife Crossing

*Wildlife and Motorist Safety a Key Goal*

Monday, the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County acquired a conservation easement from the Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose, protecting 173 acres of forested land west of Highway 17 at Laurel Curve. The easement represents the last parcel needed to connect wildlife habitat on both sides of the highway there. Combined with two properties east of the highway protected by the Land Trust last year, the easement prohibits development in these areas in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

The Land Trust's project will culminate in building a wildlife crossing under Highway 17, which carries over 50,000 daily commuters. Fatal accidents on 17 are highest at Laurel...
Curve – a site also used by mountain lions and other wildlife trying to cross the busy 4-lane road. A tunnel will help prevent collisions with wildlife. Tunnel design is expected to begin this year, supported by $3.1 million in California Transportation Commission funds – with construction slated for 2020.

Land Trust Project Director Dan Medeiros said it was necessary to protect the land on both sides of the future crossing. “You don’t want to send mountain lions into people’s backyards,” he said. “For a project like this, you need land that is largely undeveloped. We are so grateful to the Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose for helping make this project possible.”

The Dominican Sisters collaboration with the Land Trust sought to protect their “Marywood” property, preserving the environment while allowing its use for private retreats. Sister Barbara Hagel, the congregation’s “Care of Creation” coordinator affirmed, “The Laurel Curve project is a huge benefit, promoting the movement of wildlife throughout the county and providing opportunities for genetic dispersal, limited in recent years by freeways.”

Funding for the $1,625,000 easement came from the Natural Resources Agency, the Wildlife Conservation Board, the Coastal Conservancy, and Land Trust donors – and allows tunnel design plans to proceed. Medeiros emphasized how terrific it is to have the cooperation and support of multiple state agencies in a project that represents the first of its kind.

California Natural Resources Agency Secretary John Laird said, “This project demonstrates how coordinated efforts by the Land Trust of Santa Cruz, local and state governments, and business and education institutions can help preserve important wildlife habitat. The Dominican Sisters’ efforts to protect this land is a testament to their devotion to the well-being of creatures great and small.”
The Wildlife Conservation Board says it “strongly supports projects that provide multiple conservation benefits, such as in the Marywood conservation easement. Protection of this landscape will serve to enhance important watersheds, including stream and source waters, as well as maintain native terrestrial communities and landscape connectivity within an important wildlife corridor.”

Executive Officer of the Coastal Conservancy, Sam Schuchat said “We strongly support this wildlife crossing project and feel there is need for more crossings on this and other highways.”

Head of the Catholic congregation, Sister Cecilia Canales believes, “This agreement is a beautiful expression of our dedication to caring for our planet at this moment in our history.”

Land Trust Executive Director Stephen Slade said that more than 2,000 donors have given nearly $5 million to protect land on both sides of the highway and to help fund tunnel construction. Measure D also included $5 million for construction. Slade said, “This community made this a priority with their donations and votes.”