FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: 2/11/20

CONTACT:
Stephen Slade
Land Trust of Santa Cruz County
Stephen.slade@landtrustsantacruz.org
(831) 461-5705

Land Trust to Protect Ranch for Wildlife Crossing Highway 101

The Land Trust of Santa Cruz County announced today plans to protect a 2,640-acre ranch south of Highway 101. Rocks Ranch has been owned by the Bingaman family since 1947. The ranch, used for cattle grazing, straddles San Benito and Monterey Counties.

The Land Trust said the ranch is ideally located next to a tunnel system under Highway 101, which could become a wildlife crossing under the busy highway. Land Trust Executive Director, Stephen Slade, said the nonprofit has talked to Caltrans about making improvements in the tunnels. He said the crossing was critical to the genetic diversity of the mountain lions in the Santa Cruz Mountains. "They need to get to the Gabilan Range to the south," Slade said, "and this is the first critical step."

Dr. Chris Wilmers of the UCSC Puma Project said, "There is no more important priority than Rocks Ranch to protect wildlife connectivity between the Santa Cruz and Gabilan Mountains." Wilmers' researchers tracked a collared lion as it moved from Santa Cruz County towards the Gabilan Range, only to be hit and killed on Highway 101, right at the area where a wildlife crossing could be built.

That mountain lion was collared by Wilmers' team near Laurel Curve on Highway 17, where Caltrans is building a wildlife tunnel with Land Trust support. Slade said that crossing is being designed and should go out to bid within a year.
The Bingaman family will retain ownership of an adjoining 60-acre property where development will take place. Slade said the geography of the area will shield the wildlife crossing from the development.

Ben Bingaman said the arrangement allows the family to develop a 60-acre property adjacent to Highway 101 – while protecting the rest of the ranch. "It's a win-win for us," Bingaman said, "and for wildlife and the citizens of the San Benito County, which is desperate for tax revenues." Bingaman worked on the ranch when he was a boy. "I'm glad not to see it all built up," he said.

State Senator Anna Caballero hailed the deal. "I want to congratulate the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County for acquiring the Rocks Ranch property in Aromas. I had the opportunity to visit and tour this beautiful site, which they intend to protect as an important open space, natural resource and wildlife corridor. Thank you for your wise investment and stewardship."

"It is a wonderful benefit for our region," said Assemblymember Robert Rivas, "to have organizations like the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County that continue to find solutions that preserve our natural environment. This project will ensure the preservation of open space and provide a wildlife corridor that will benefit the surrounding habitats."

San Benito County Supervisor Anthony Botelho who oversees Western San Benito County said, "Having been on the ranch, I can attest for its natural beauty and importance for wildlife habitat. At one time, it was being explored for development, all of us should be so grateful to the Bingaman Family and the Land Trust for pursuing preserving these lands forever."

The Land Trust did not disclose details of the transaction, which will take several years to complete, as they seek private and public funding.