

PROJECT INVESTIGATION: Proposed Acquisition of Cowell Ranch Property

California Department of Parks and Recreation

REGIONAL SETTING

Fueled by the rapid expansion of jobs and demand for housing in the San Francisco Bay Area, urban growth has exploded in the formerly sleepy ranch lands of eastern Contra Costa County. The county and the affected cities of Antioch, Clayton, and Brentwood have responded by buying open space and setting new urban limit lines. The East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) has been establishing regional parks east of Mt. Diablo, and the Contra Costa Water District manages recreation on 20,000 acres of protected watershed on the adjacent Los Vaqueros Reservoir property. There is now a continuous belt of public parkland and open space running through the hills of Contra Costa County from Walnut Creek east to the orchards of the delta. The Cowell Ranch property would create a new segment to this belt, narrowing the unprotected gap between Round Valley/Los Vaqueros and Black Diamond Mines Regional Park to the north (See maps). Close to 3 million people live within 30 miles of the property.

PROPERTY DESCRIPTION

The Cowell Ranch property that the California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) proposes to acquire is located immediately south and east of the City of Brentwood in the hills of the eastern slope of the Diablo Range. It is roughly bracketed by rural county roads: Marsh Creek and Camino Diablo roads on the south, Walnut Blvd. Marsh Creek Rd. and Concord Blvd. on the east, Briones Valley Rd. to the north, and Deer Valley Rd. to the west. The topography consists of broad drainage bottoms and gentle-to-steep hills. Elevations range from 120 feet at the edge of the San Joaquin Valley along lower Marsh Creek to 500 feet on the steep ridge tops overlooking Briones and Marsh Creek Valleys at the property's east boundary. The vegetation is mainly grassland with some blue oak savannah. Marsh Creek, which crosses Cowell Ranch in a north-south direction, drains most of the property. Except for various utility corridors and a 265-acre piece of flat land containing a 227-acre apple orchard, the proposed acquisition lands are used for cattle grazing.

Land use designations: The property is in the unincorporated area of Contra Costa County. Zoning is A-4 (agricultural reserve-Williamson Act); general plan designation is Agricultural Lands. It is in City of Brentwood's Special Planning Area J, and partly within Brentwood's Sphere of Influence. In the 1990s the Cowell Foundation and the City of Brentwood actively considered major new development on the Cowell Ranch, but this plan was dropped by the year 2000 when the County Board of Supervisors placed all but 480 acres outside the county's Urban Limits Line. These 480 acres form an irregular piece of land on the northeast side of the ranch. This piece has been removed from the property slated for State Parks and

will be available for development. The Cowell Foundation is also excluding 30 acres for a future community college campus; this piece is about ¼ mile east of the DPR John Marsh Home property. Also excluded are 62 acres of land slated for the planned Highway 4 bypass. The bypass footprint crosses the eastern side of the property and when built will isolate a 112-acre piece of the orchard as well as about 5 acres on lower Marsh Creek.

Inholdings and encumbrances: The property to be acquired contains three inholdings: Contra Costa County Flood Control District's 306-acre Marsh Creek Reservoir property (to be increased from the existing 93 acres), a pipeline corridor owned by Contra Costa Water District, and the 14-acre historic John Marsh Home site already owned by DPR. There are numerous easements on the property, most for utility corridors. Three lines of P.G.&E. high-voltage electrical transmission towers cross the property as well as buried cables and several pipelines for natural gas. The East Contra Costa Irrigation District has an easement corridor containing a canal and pipeline that runs through the eastern edges of the property. The Contra Costa Flood Control and Water Conservation District has flowage easements for temporary flood storage over low lands upstream of Marsh Creek and Dry Creek Reservoirs. There are two agricultural leases on the property: Sparrowk Ranch is leasing the grasslands for cattle grazing, and Camino Diablo Ranch is leasing the apple orchard. Headquarters for the Sparrowk Ranch operation, consisting of a house and ranch outbuildings, is located on Marsh Creek next to the historic John Marsh Home. The leases for both tenants are set to terminate within the next 3 years.

Biogeographic elements: A thorough biological survey of the ranch was done in 1993 by the environmental planning firm, LSA, while preparing an EIR in for the development proposal for the Cowell Foundation's development proposal mentioned above. The survey found that, in addition to the predominant non-native grassland and the flatter areas used for the apple orchard and dry-farmed oats, there are small areas of blue oak woodland, valley sink scrub, vernal pool, riparian woodland, and freshwater marsh. Two related woody plants, heartscale and San Joaquin saltbush, both found in the alkali sink scrub, are special status species (CNPS 1B, 2-2-2). The survey found 12 special status species of animals. In the ranch's aquatic habitats (vernal pools, seeps, stock ponds and Marsh Creek) were found two types of fairy shrimp including Branchinecta lynchi (Fed-Endangered) and Linderiella occidentalis (NDDDB-G2G3); a diving beetle, Hygrotus curvipes (NDDDB-G1S1), California tiger salamander, northwestern pond turtle, and California red-legged frog (Fed-Threatened). From the grassland and alkali scrub habitats the survey recorded San Joaquin pocket mouse, loggerhead shrike, California horned lark, burrowing owl, prairie falcon, and northern harrier. All the above species are on the Cal. Dept. Fish & Game's Species of Concern lists. The ranch contains suitable habitat for the San Joaquin kit fox (Cal-Threatened, Fed-Endangered). The kit fox is known to live less than 2 miles away at Black Diamond Mines Regional Park.

ACCESS AND USE

Because public roads encircle and pass through the Cowell Ranch, there are many actual and potential access points into it. The John Marsh Home/Sparrowk Ranch headquarters area could provide parking space and also is the node for the ranch's internal dirt roads. The Round Valley Staging Area, leased and developed by EBRPD, might also be used by DPR to provide access for future Cowell Ranch trails.

Trail use will no doubt become the ranch's predominant form of recreation. While the majority of trail use will be by local residents, some of whom live within a short walk from the property, the acquisition will also allow additions to the regional trails system. The Cowell Ranch property extends down Marsh Creek to within 1.3 miles of the southern terminus of the county's paved Marsh Creek Trail. Marsh Creek Trail is complete from Brentwood to the Delta at Big Break Regional Shoreline. Existing trails connect the Oakland Hills (Bay Ridge Trail) through Mt. Diablo State Park and Morgan Territory to Round Valley Regional Park, adjacent to the Cowell Ranch. Building the short remaining gaps will allow a trail from Oakland to the Delta, becoming an alternate route for the Mokelumne Coast-to-Crest state trail corridor and the coast-to-coast American Discovery Trail. It would also intersect the Anza National Historic Trail near Antioch.

DPR plans to begin improvements to the John Marsh Home site at the same time it expects to acquire the Cowell Ranch. Visitation of this important cultural resource by school children and others will grow sharply once it is opened to the public. Before significant new recreation development can be done for either property the California State Park and Recreation Commission must classify it as a state park, state historic park, or other classification unit and adopt general plan before significant park development may occur. Nonetheless, depending on available funding, limited development to allow early public use may be done.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

This project meets DPR's mission to "...provide for the health, inspiration, and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities of high-quality outdoor recreation." The acquisition will make possible construction of trails and habitat restoration. Trail use will no doubt become the ranch's predominant form of recreation. DPR plans to begin improvements to the John Marsh Home site at the same time it expects to acquire the Cowell Ranch. Visitation of this important cultural resource by school children and others will grow sharply once it is opened to the public. Before significant new recreation development can be done for either property the California State Park and Recreation Commission must classified it as a state park, state historic park, or other classification unit and adopt general plan before significant park development may occur. Nonetheless, depending on available funding, limited development to allow early public use may be done.

SUPPORT AND FUNDING

Contra Costa County, City of Brentwood, and EBRPD support creation of a park at Cowell Ranch. Contra Costa County legislators Senator Tom Torlakson and Assemblyman Joe Cansiamilla have also been long time supporters of keeping this property in open space. The State Resources Agency supports the proposal, and the following boards and agencies have approved funds for its acquisition: DPR, State Coastal Conservancy, Wildlife Conservation Board, Caltrans (environmental mitigation), and the federal Bureau of Reclamation (endangered species mitigation).

RECOMMENDATION

DPR recommends that acquisition of the Cowell Ranch property as described in this report be approved for inclusion in the State Park System.

Sources and contacts:

Much of the information used in this report came from privileged real estate documents and the non-confidential report: *Working Paper: Opportunities and Constraints for the Cowell Ranch Acquisition Area*, prepared for TPL by Jim Cutler Planning, Mediation and Environmental Services, May, 2002.

The following people provided information used in the report: Catherine Elliott and Tim Wirth, TPL; Brian Hickey, Mt. Diablo Sector of DPR; Bob Doyle, East Bay Regional Parks District; Patrick Roach, Contra Costa County Planning; Bob Nuzum, Contra Costa Water District; Kevin Emigh, Contra Costa Flood Control and Water Conservation District; Larry Preston, E. Contra Costa Irrigation District; Tim Nielson, City of Brentwood Planning; and others.