



A land trust's vision: Six Rivers to the Sea

By GLENN FRANCO SIMMONS
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The Northcoast Regional Land Trust foresees a future wherein land from Six Rivers National Forest to the Pacific Ocean is preserved in private and public ownership.

"The Six Rivers to the Sea concept is designed to establish corridors of permanently protected and well-managed land between the Six Rivers National Forest and our coast," said land trust Projects Manager Erik Wilson. "Our job is to work with interested private landowners in that land area to essentially fill in the gaps between protected public lands, so that we can maintain landscape-scale conservation areas long into the future, which can provide the open spaces, outstanding wildlife habitat, continued production of resources and ecosystem services that make this place such a magnificent place to live."

"Six Rivers to the Sea combines direct permanent conservation measures (conservation easements) with restoration and stewardship support for landowners. It also is establishing

WHAT IS THE NRLT?

The Northcoast Regional Land Trust, which includes local residents dedicated to the trust's goals of land conservation, is interested in a tri-county range that includes Del Norte, Humboldt and Trinity counties.

"Of these three counties a respective 50 percent, 75 percent and 90 percent of the resource land bases are publicly owned," according to the land trust's Web site (<http://www.ncrlt.org/>). "Presently there are six community-focused land trusts operating within limited geographic areas in the region, but more than 90 percent of the private regional landscape and most of the towns and communities are not served by these organizations."

"Although countywide land trusts, quasi-governmental open-space districts and county agencies provide open-space protection services in other areas of California, the North Coast previously lacked regional communication, collaboration and options for land trust services in our region. NRLT was established to fill this void and create a central organization representing our regional interests and efforts at the state and national levels."

The NRLT is a nonprofit organization, its Web site stated.

"(It) is a community-based nonprofit organization seeking to ensure land use that preserves the economic and ecological characteristics of the North Coast," the Web site states. "(Its) mission is to protect working landscapes, farms, forests and grazing lands, and to preserve and protect land for its natural, educational, scenic and historic values."

The Web site stated land trust members will "work with landowners on a voluntary basis to promote stewardship of Humboldt, Del Norte and Trinity counties' healthy and productive resource base, natural systems, and quality of life."

"NRLT offers land conservation services including conservation easements, acquisitions, outreach and assistance to individuals and organizations to protect North Coast lands," the Web site states. "Through association with NRLT, landowners have the opportunity to dedicate their land for community betterment and leave a legacy of their lives and values."

"NRLT leverages the efforts of our volunteer leaders and professional staff as we create partnerships with contributing individuals, government funding sources, individual and corporate trusts, and community and private foundations."

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Erik Wilson, projects manager for the Northcoast Regional Land Trust, stands on the tide gate at the edge of Freshwater Farms. The tide gate controls the flow of water from Freshwater Slough into Wood Creek. Tyson Ritter/The Eureka Reporter

permanent landscape-scale conservation corridors by placing conservation easements on private lands within a mosaic of public lands that together span across our county."

Restoration and stewardship support will ensure that "the management of the land will emphasize healthy watersheds and wildlife habitat," he added.

Already set aside are 6,000 acres and the land trust aims to have 19,000 acres on four different owner-operated ranchlands within the next three years, Wilson said. The land trust will protect all 25,000 acres with conservation easements.

"The current projects that make up this initiative are all owner-operated working ranch and forestlands," he said, "and the easements are designed to restrict development and other activities that would interfere with sustainable production and management of the forests, grasslands and waterways, in perpetuity."

"This is an exciting opportunity to work with landowners dedicated to stewardship that will provide long-term



Steps are planned to eventually remove thistles, like the one above, from Freshwater Farms.

Tyson Ritter/The Eureka Reporter

economic viability and maintain vast expanses of fish and wildlife habitat throughout the North Coast," said land trust Executive Director Maya Conrad.

Another large land trust project is the 54-acre Freshwater Farms Reserve that parallels a portion of Myrtle Avenue west of Three Corners east of Eureka, Wilson said.

"In 2005 Rick Storre (owner and operator of Freshwater Farms Nursery) sold 54 acres (of his 80 acres) to the land trust," he said. "He continues to own 26 acres (adjacent to our 54 acres) and owns and operates the Freshwater Farms Nursery on it, including the barns, buildings, etc. We have decided to call our 54 acres the 'Freshwater Farms Reserve.'"

It's also been called the Freshwater Creek Estuary

Conservation Area; however, Freshwater Farms Reserve is what has stuck.

"This project is designed to enhance the lowland/wetland portion of the property by reintroducing tidewater to approximately 35 acres of the property, which will create habitat for rearing salmon and other fish species, rare salt marsh plants and many bird species," said Wilson, adding that he is also responsible for the reserve's stewardship.

"While we are enhancing the wetland portion of the property with the restoration project — which has poor agricultural values — the upland portion of the property has excellent agricultural values," he said, "which we are currently grazing with organic cattle."

There are currently about 30 head of beef cattle, he said, noting that last year there were dairy cattle located on the reserve. Wilson said the beef cattle are owned by a Klamath resident who is leasing about 35 acres on the reserve from the land trust.

The reserve project will eventually reduce the number of acres to be grazed to about 20, Wilson said.

WHY A CONSERVATION EASEMENT?

An important function of the Northcoast Regional Land Trust is its conservation easement program that can be accessed on the Web. A short list of questions is available at <http://www.ncrlt.org/conserve/easements> to assist local landowners in deciding if they want to take part in this project.

Landowners may opt for easements for a variety of reasons, including a desire to protect natural features of their property, allow their families to retain the land in the face of estate taxes and/or protect the land from being subdivided or converted to non-agricultural uses, according to the Web site.

"A conservation easement is a voluntary agreement that allows a landowner to limit the type of development or resource use on their property while retaining private ownership of the land," the Web site states. "When completed, the conservation easement becomes part of the property deed. ... An agricultural and open-space conservation easement restricts land to agriculture and open-space uses. The easement generally prohibits any subdivision or development or any practice which would damage the agricultural and open space value of the land."

The land trust said there may be tax benefits for landowners who donate relinquished rights to, for example, the land trust or a government agency and by meeting specific criteria.

"The organization which receives ... the easement ... accepts responsibility for monitoring and enforcing the restrictions in perpetu-



Cattle roam on 30 acres of Freshwater Farms land. Tyson Ritter/The Eureka Reporter

ity," according to the Web site. "Tax benefits are available only for perpetual easements that subject all future landowners to their restrictions."

The land trust Web site stated that landowners participating in the conservation easement program retain their rights to use the land as long as that use does not interfere with the easement's purpose and/or specified restrictions.

"While an easement could remove development rights, the landowner still holds the title to the property, the right to restrict public access and the right to pass the property to whomever," the Web site states. "The property can be mortgaged, transferred or sold just as it normally would, whether it is encumbered by a timber-harvest plan, a power-line right-of-way or a conservation easement."