Family seeks to protect working ranch in conservation easement

By NADAN RUMPIN
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The sprawling Chalk Mountain Ranch along the forested mountains outside of Bridgeville has been owned by the Barnwell family for well over 100 years.

In 1884, William H. Barnwell started the ranch with 160 acres of land that he purchased for $250 in gold coins. But his descendants, owners of a now 7,381-acre working family ranch, are now ready to sell the land as a conservation easement to the state to protect it from development or division.

Les Barnwell, whose great-grandfather made the initial purchase with gold coins, now manages the ranch and its logging operations for the family.

The timber operation provides the bulk of the money the family needs to get by.

"Keeping it on one piece forever is very important to us," Les Barnwell said. "The easement is a tool to ensure that it stays that way whether it is to our ownership or not."

With ever-increasing timber harvesting regulations and costs, the family sees the easement deal as a way to ensure future generations will continue to earn a living from the productive timber and grazing lands into the future.

"Everything is going up but the cost of trees," said Gloria Barnwell, Les Barnwell's mother. She and her husband Phil also live on the property.

A large-scale timber harvest was conducted on the ranch in 1973 to generate the money needed to pay a relative who wanted out of his portion of ownership.

Much of the property's second-growth fir trees, under Les Barnwell's management, now tower above and block out sunlight where he said he once hunted deer in open fields covered only by ferns.

The Chalk Mountain Ranch conservation easement deal has been in the works for nearly five years and is part of the North Coast Regional Land Trust's Six Rivers to the Sea program, which aims to conserve working ranches from the Six Rivers National Forest down to the coast.

The Six Rivers to the Sea program was inspired by former NCRLT President Steve Hackert.

After finalizing the NCRLT's first conservation easement under the program on his own family's Fernsdale area, Homer Creek Ranch in 2002, Hackert said other landowners have come forward seeking his help, including the Carrington, Grands, Sweet, Chamber and Barnwell families.

Hackert has agreed to assist the Barnwell family in working with the
numerous state and federal agencies to secure the deal, which will be monitored by the NCRLT on behalf of the state.

Federal funding for the easement has been earmarked in both houses of Congress and is currently being considered in committees for a fiscal year 2008 appropriations bill.

The Chalk Mountain property is being appraised before the sale, which is anticipated to occur in the next year, but it is estimated at approximately $6.8 million.

"Compared to other conservation projects across the U.S., it's a bargain," Hackett said.

The Chalk Mountain Ranch easement is currently ranked as the No. 1 forest conservation project by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection's Stewardship Coordinating Committee.

The conservation deal has also attracted national attention and is ranked No. 17 under the federal Forest Legacy Project and has garnered the support of Sen. Dianne Feinstein and U.S. Rep. Mike Thompson, as well as the Humboldt County Planning Department.

Second District Supervisor Roger Rodoni toured the property this week and talked with Barnwell in advance of a letter of support for the easement that is scheduled to go before the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors for approval on Tuesday.

The letter to Feinstein identifies the project as a top conservation priority for the county.

The project is also backed by a slew of environmental groups, including the Eel River Watershed Improvement Group, the Mattole Restoration Council, the Humboldt County Resource Conservation District and the Humboldt Area Foundation.

What Les Barnwell and Hackett said is unique about the Chalk Mountain Ranch easement is the amount of fine-tuning that has been negotiated to protect some of his family's long-standing traditions, including a horse endurance race and a hunting and guide operation that will both continue.

Each year the family hosts 24 clients who travel from across the region to bag a buck from the ranch's abundant herd of black-tailed deer.

Standing atop a sunny ridge overlooking the land where he grew up and works daily, Les Barnwell said he is proud of his family's responsible land stewardship and timber harvest operation.

He said his sons are in-