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County's Six Rivers to the Sea Project is complete

Two Bridgeville
ranches protected
by conservation
easement

Luke Ramseth

THE TIMES-STANDARD

After more than 25 years of cattle running, hunting, and logging on his 8,200-acre ranch near Blocksburg, Tim Pricer is still blown away by its beauty.

"It's a phenomenal ranch," Pricer said. "I've been to a lot of ranches, and this is still breathtaking to me."

Tim and Jackie Pricer's Charles Mountain Ranch is one portion of a 15,000-acre conservation easement — joined with the Chalk Mountain Ranch closer to Bridgeville, owned by Les and Janet Barnwell. — that was finalized this month and will preserve the land of the two ranches.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The Chalk Rock Ranch, owned by Les and Janet Barnwell, is part of a 15,000 acre conservation easement deal made last month that will protect the land for years to come.

The deal removes redevelopment or subdivision rights from the property, no matter who owns it, while placing restrictions on logging, mining and building, and protecting waterways.

"Years ago, we talked about what we could do to make sure it never gets subdivided," Tim Pricer said.

The easement process, which involved the Northcoast Regional Land Trust, the Cal Fire Forest Legacy Program, and other state and local agencies, has taken more than seven years, he said.

Some of the state and federal funding for conservation projects dried up in 2008 during the economic downturn, Tim Pricer said. The deal was finalized last month, and is the last of a series of similar conservation easement projects created on ranches in Humboldt County, collectively known as the Six Rivers to the Sea Project.

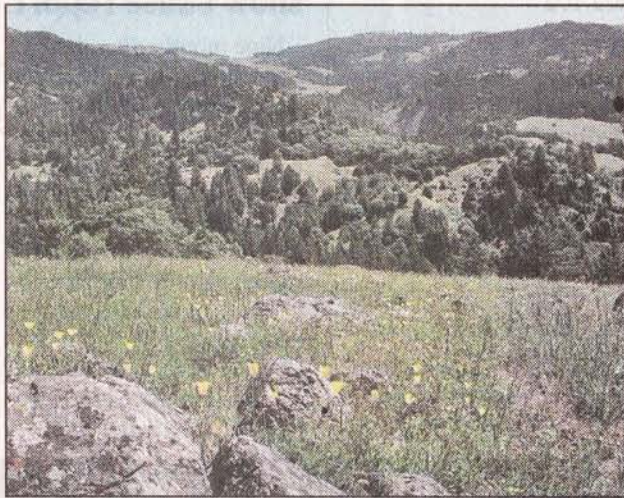
Steve Hackett of Agland Engineering, Inc., was one of the first ranchers in the county to set up an conservation easement on his own Howe Creek Ranch near Rio Dell back in 2002. Since then, he's helped other ranchers and landowners, all part of the Six Rivers to the Sea Project, through the long and arduous process of securing funding and setting up easements on their own properties.

Those ranches include the Price Creek Ranch, also near Rio Dell, the Iaqua Ranch in the Yager Creek area, the Sweet Ranch near Petrolia,

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TIM PRICER

Charles Mountain Ranch



SUBMITTED PHOTO

A meadow on the Charles Mountain Ranch, near Bridgeville, will be preserved for years to come due to a recent conservation easement deal made by its owners, Tim and Jackie Pricer.

and eventually the Barnwell's Chalk Mountain Ranch.

"It's an epic need (for ranchers)," Hackett said. "There's a big disparity between what I can produce on my ranch and what it's worth. That disparity is growing." Hackett said people moving out of the Bay Area often want a good size piece of land or a big "trophy ranch." That makes the

prospect of selling or breaking up a ranch for redevelopment appealing to some. He said it's critical not just to ensure single ranches are able to stay in agricultural production, but that many properties are able to do so. Tim Pricer said he's seen examples of ranches nearby that got "chopped up," sold

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EASEMENT

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off and redeveloped into 40-acre parcels. He said he wanted to avoid that possibility, despite the fact that he knew creating a conservation easement would devalue his property.

A conservation easement devalues a property because the entire chunk of land must be sold together, and it will never be able to be sold for redevelopment or subdivision, said Sarah Pilkington, outreach and development director at the Northcoast Regional Land Trust.

Pilkington said when landowners give up some of their property rights — and consequently lose some property value — the land trust pays them back for that. The trust assesses what the property could have sold for, if subdivided, and gives landowners the difference.

The landowner can then keep that amount, or donate it.

"It's public money, but it's protecting a public resource," Pilkington said.

Pilkington said the process of creating an easement includes a fairly complicated legal process. "There's a lot of protocols," she said.

During the formation of the easement, the land trust serves as an intermediary between the various state and federal agencies and the landowners. Those agencies include Cal Fire, the Department of Fish and Game, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, among others. The U.S. Forest Service Forest Legacy Program, the state Wildlife Conservation Board and the State Coastal Conservancy contribute funding to the easement.

Pilkington said the Charles and Chalk mountain ranches were a major priority for the land trust and other conservation groups. There are big oak woodlands and numerous waterways on the two properties that they had an interest in protecting, she said.

After putting the easement in place, the Northcoast Regional Land Trust is charged with monitoring the property once per year, to make sure the owners comply with the

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SARAH PILKINGTON

outreach and development director at the Northcoast Regional Land Trust

easement agreement. Other agencies would take over overseeing the land if the Northcoast Regional Land Trust dissolves, Pilkington said. Cal Fire holds the easement agreement, and also helps monitor the property.

More than 29,000 acres — including seven working ranches in Humboldt and Trinity counties — have participated in forest conservation easements, according to a Northcoast Regional Land Trust press release. Conservation easements are crucial in Humboldt County, Pilkington said, because of the large amount of privately-owned land. Approximately 85 percent of the county's watersheds are on private land.

Statewide, the Forest Legacy Program has conserved nearly 50,000 acres in similar "working forest" conservation easements. Those easements are all similar to the Chalk and Charles mountain ranch easements because they prevent subdivision but still allow and encourage traditional uses like timber harvesting, grazing, and hunting.

Tim Pricer said he is thrilled. "We don't really have any plans of selling it," he said. Tim Pricer said he thinks his youngest son, who is 26, will likely take over the ranch eventually. His son has already taken over some of the cattle operation, and he'll eventually start to take over some of the hunting tours that take place on the ranch.

"I can assure everybody, it's always going to look like it does now," Tim Pricer said of his remote property. "It's truly, truly sustainable."

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