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## Project seeks to bring ‘cows and coho’ together in Freshwater



*Ryan Bihm pulls rotted, old boards Wednesday from a side wall of the circa 1910 Graham-Long barn at Freshwater Farms Reserve that is being restored the Northcoast Regional Land Trust.*

By [Will Houston](#), Eureka Times-Standard

<http://www.times-standard.com/general-news/20160827/project-seeks-to-bring-cows-and-coho-together-in-freshwater>

While the history of the Humboldt Bay region portrays a land where the interests of fish and farmers seemed to always be at odds, one ongoing project in Freshwater is working to prove history need not repeat itself.

“All of Humboldt Bay had these seasonal, off-channel estuaries and over time those were converted to agriculture,” North Coast Regional Land Trust Executive Director Mike Cipra said.

“The whole point of this project is to combine agriculture and restoration and show you can have cows and coho on the same land.”

Diked, drained and developed for over a century, the Humboldt Bay region has seen significant losses of its natural wetlands as the landscape has been tamed for agriculture and urban development. According to the Humboldt Bay Wildlife Refuge, 90 percent of the bay’s 9,000 acres of historic salt marsh habitat have been lost due to development and diking.

But through these losses came one of Humboldt County’s defining features — a strong agricultural and timber heritage dating back to the 19th century.

“The diking was really early in the history of the bay,” College of the Redwoods Construction Technologies Professor Bill Hole said. “Even Gunther Island, which we know as Indian Island, was diked off in the early 1860s. Dikes were used to totally increase the farm land and productivity for cattle and for growing wheat and oats. It was a major agricultural zone.”

## Mimicking Nature

At the Freshwater Farms Reserve just northeast of Eureka, the North Coast Regional Land Trust has been working since 2005 to restore natural habitat for threatened coho salmon while also maintaining the area’s long-standing agricultural history.

The nonprofit purchased the 74-acre property on Myrtle Avenue from the now late-Richard Storre in 2005 and later bought the nearby Graham-Long barn and milk parlor in 2012.

By 2009, the first phase of the project was completed and had created 25 acres of new salt marsh habitat, new saltwater channels and a new estuary pool on the western edge of the property. A tide gate was also removed, allowing the tidal movements of the bay to once again roll into Freshwater and Wood creeks.

The land trust’s project manager Kerry McNamee said that while coho were still able to access Freshwater and Wood creeks to spawn, the baby salmon would typically be

flushed out into Humboldt Bay during heavy winter rains before they were fully developed or ready. The creation of new channels and the estuary pool in 2009 and 2010 was one way to prevent that.

“What this habitat does is it allows them to access this low-gradient, slow flowing water where they can acclimate to the transition zone of salt and fresh water and grow and feed and rear so that when they are ready to enter the ocean as smolts, they’ll be that much more likely to survive,” McNamee said.

And the results are in. Recent monitoring by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have found that over 100 juvenile coho salmon were rearing in the estuary pool alone, according to Cipra.

Now the North Coast Regional Land Trust is working to expand the reserve’s fish habitat by a further 20 acres by creating new sloughs, larger channels and salt marsh habitat just north of Wood Creek on the southern end of the property.

The estimated \$425,000 project began on Aug. 8 and still has a lot of heavy lifting left to do before it reaches its October completion date.

The land was littered with invasive reed canary grass and cattails that had to go. But a little over a week from when they broke ground on Aug. 15, the construction crews from Arcata-based contractor G.R. Sundberg Inc. had already made significant progress in what McNamee called “mimicking nature.”

Several large channels had already been cut deep into the ground, with each resembling the shape of a natural slough. Large chunks of trees will later be added to the channels to provide hiding spots for the salmon as well as to secure the structure of the banks, McNamee said.

Once completed, a natural ribbon cutting is set to take place in which the barriers between Wood Creek and the new channels will be breached.

The project is being funded by California Coastal Conservancy, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program.

With the new fish habitat, the cows grazing on nearby pastures and a nearly mile-long trail to explore the landscape, the reserve is also meant to serve as an educational tool for local schools about “inclusive environmental solutions,” Cipra said.

“You have both productive agriculture and productive habitat on the same land,” he said. “They are compatible. It’s not something we have to choose between. We can have both.”

## Agricultural History

Less than 100 yards from the ongoing construction at Wood Creek stands what Hole called “one of the significant pieces of cultural history around Humboldt Bay” — the Graham-Long barn.

By the start of the new year, the North Coast Regional Land Trust hopes to restore to barn to near its former glory days.

“I’m excited when we honor that, when we honor the past and carry something on to future generations,” said Hole, who has worked as a consultant for the project.

Built in 1910, the old wooden barn was historically used to house dairy cows and was built with lumber from old-growth redwood trees. Now 106 years old, the barn is missing some shingles and has some wood rot at its foundations. But on the whole, it seemed to have imbibed some the longevity of the trees it was made from. That can only take it so far, however.

Looking at the concaving roof on the barn’s eastern side on Aug. 24, land trust project manager Dan Ehresman said the renovation likely could not have waited any longer.

“We really felt we needed to take this on this year,” Ehresman said. “We didn’t know if it was going to make it through another winter especially given the condition of this side. Even in the time I’ve been here, the bowing is more severe.”

The first phase of the project, which will cost around \$200,000, will replace the barn’s foundation and the old-growth redwood shingles with a metal roof.

The second phase of the project is set to replace the siding and doors of the barn as well as begin work on the adjacent milk parlor. Ehresman said the North Coast Regional Land Trust is currently seeking either monetary donations to fund this phase as well as salvage materials.

Five crew members from Bayside contractor Ryan Sullivan are working on the project, with the first phase expected to be completed by October and the remaining phases by the start of 2017.

Once the project is completed, the barn and milk parlor will be leased out to Kneeland Glen Farmstand, which already neighbors the barn, as well as Fresh Roots Humboldt.

The barn’s history can be traced back to William Steele Long and family, who arrived in Humboldt County in 1854.

While initially trying his hand at prospecting and the hotel business near Orleans Bar, Long bought 240 acres of land in Freshwater where he constructed a home, the Freshwater Saloon, a hotel as well as a town hall, according [a 2013 historical report by Hole's students Joan Watanabe and Steve Perris](#). He later bought 160 more acres where the barn would be constructed about two decades after his death in 1888, according to the report.

The barn is named after Long's two daughters, Emma Long and Josephine Graham, who inherited the estate in 1909, just a year before the barn was completed.

"Every time I come in here, I see something new," Ehresman said.

*Will Houston can be reached at 707-441-0504.*

### **To Donate**

Anyone interested in making a monetary or material donation to the Northcoast Regional Land Trust for the Graham-Long barn renovation is asked to contact the land trust at 707-822-2242 or [www.ncrlt.org](http://www.ncrlt.org) or project manager Dan Ehresman at [D.Ehresman@ncrlt.org](mailto:D.Ehresman@ncrlt.org)