CHANGE ON THE LANDSCAPE

Les and Gloria Barnwell stand in Gloria's favorite glade of oaks on Chalk Mountain Ranch.

Chalk Mt. Ranch seeks conservation deal

John Driscoll
The Times-Standard

In 1894, William H. Barnwell bought 160 acres outside Bridgeville, under the shadow of Chalk Mountain, for $250 worth of gold coins.

His son, William Jr., built up Chalk Mountain Ranch, which is still run by the Barnwell family. Ranching has since grown to be a more-complicated, less-certain venture, and it has led the Barnwells to relinquish some control of the land to keep the place intact for future generations.

ON THE WEB

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"We're so dedicated to the heritage of the place, we want to keep it in one piece," said Les Barnwell, who manages the ranch today.

Les and his parents, Philo and Gloria, are working with the North Coast Regional Land Trust on a conservation easement that would cover nearly 7,400 acres of Chalk Mountain Ranch.

The deal would remove the development rights on the property and place restrictions on logging and mining.

Sporting a metal hardhat with edges upturned like a cowboy hat, Les Barnwell looked over the edge of a road into a stand of Douglas fir. In the 1970s, during a wedding, friends and family shot sporting clays there. It was all grass then.

It's just one of the many changes on the property over the years. Prairies are being squeezed by Douglas fir, and so are acres of oak wood-
Les Barnwell worked off the ranch for years while the trees grew up again. Since then, his practice has been to selectively cut the forest in an effort to improve the quality of the trees there.

In a pretty glade on a gentle slope toward the center of the ranch, Les Barnwell said the trees are relatively recent arrivals on what was once open ground — the original 160 acres his great grandfather purchased.

"This is what I want my forests to look like," he said.

The conservation easement may allow the Barnwells to shift their forest management from one for profit to one that focuses more on wildlife and ecology.

The property is being appraised to determine the value of the easement they intend to sell, which is estimated at about $6.8 million. The Barnwells will make part of that contribution themselves, and the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy Project is being asked for $4.9 million in funding, an appropriation expected to be taken up by Congress over the next few weeks.

CalFire, the California Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are contributing and endorsing the project, part of the land trust's Six Rivers to the Sea Program. CalFire will hold the easement, and the land trust will monitor it. The program already has nearly 10,000 acres under such easements, and now has an option on a 1,500-acre ranch outside Petrolia.

The transaction would prevent division of the land, development not related to the ranching and timber operations and keep it under single management. It would keep a set percentage of the land in conifer forest.