Easement protects Petrolia land forever
Working lands program now guards 12,000 acres of operating ranches

John Driscoll
The Times-Standard

After years of having developers press Francis and Lorana Sweet to sell their lush sheep and cattle ranch outside Petrolia, the couple has agreed to preserve the land forever. The conservation easement they signed onto is part of a project that has protected 12,000 acres of working ranches in Humboldt County. Not much will change on the ranch — and that’s the point, to keep the land in production while removing the threat of it being divided up.

“To me it would have been a crime to subdivide it,” said Lorana Sweet, “but it would have been prime to subdivide it into smaller parcels.”

The Sweets have worked on the

See EASEMENT/A2

Francis and Lorana Sweet at their Valley View Ranch.

EASEMENT
FROM A1

1,500-acre ranch since 1974, and they bought a herd of sheep in 1987. As they’ve aged, it became less certain what would happen to the Valley View Ranch when it was passed down to their six children.

Lorana Sweet said that the ranch really doesn’t produce enough to support a single family, let alone six. Estate taxes and other expenses that have frequently forced sales of property by heirs, after which the land is split into parcels unable to produce significant agricultural products.

The California Coastal Conservancy, the California Forest Legacy Program, the California Department of Fish and Game, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service and the California Wildlife Conservation Board contributed funds to buy the easement. The California Department of Forestry will hold the easement, and the Northcoast Regional Land Trust will monitor it, as it has other easements under the Six Rivers to the Sea project. The Sweets also contributed a portion of the value of the easement.

“The project is the direct result of need,” said Steve Hackett of Agland Engineering, Inc., who with San Francisco conservation attorney Greg Hendrickson helped the Sweets through the long, arduous process.

The difference between the market value of properties for development and the value of what the land can produce in agriculture is getting wider all the time, Hackett said. It’s critical not just to ensure that single ranches are able to stay in agricultural production, but that many such properties are able to do so, he said.

Other ranches that have signed conservation easement agreements are Hackett’s family’s Howe Creek Ranch, Price Creek Ranch, both near Rio Dell, and Jaqua Ranch in the Yager Creek area.

The Six Rivers to the Sea Project is helping make sure that there are working lands set aside for the future, said land trust Executive Director Kevin McMahan.

“In terms of the tradition of a family-owned and operated ranch ... it’s pretty important to have these larger tracts preserved,” McMahan said.

He said the arrangement is a testament to a lot of people’s hard work and endurance.

John Driscoll can be reached at 441-0904 or jdriscoll@times-standard.com.