

Mission Village VOICE

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Vegetable row crops on the Silva Ranch with grazing lands in the distance. *Photo by Lynn Overtree*

SBALT REPORT

Taking stock of San Benito's bounty

By Kariminder Brown

As this strange and difficult year draws to a close, two things have become strikingly clear: 1) agriculture and those who labor in the industry are absolutely essential to our food supply, and 2) outdoor, open spaces are essential for the physical and mental health of our communities.

Here in San Benito County, we are blessed with abundance in both categories. There are few places in the world that produce as wide a variety of crops and animal products throughout the year -- here it's almost always harvest time! Our agricultural lands also provide residents and visitors with stunning views and a connection to wide, open spaces that support wild animals, wildflowers, watershed protection, and carbon capture, while also producing nutritious food.

Farmers, ranchers, and farmworkers, are

an integral part of our County's history and heritage, along with the indigenous people who tended these fertile lands for millennia before the arrival of missionaries and settlers.

We cannot take San Benito's agricultural lands for granted. The San Benito Agricultural Land Trust (SBALT) seeks to preserve the most valuable ag lands, in balance with competing needs for housing, transportation, and commercial growth. We hope you will join us to support this effort.

If you are on SBALT's mailing list, look for our Year-End Appeal in your virtual or physical mailbox and make a generous donation to help protect more of San Benito County's unique agricultural lands. You can also contribute any time through SBALT's website www.sanbenitolandtrust.org.

Thank you and best wishes for safe and happy holidays! ■



Francisco Mejia washes carrots at Phil Foster Ranch last spring. *Photo by Cathy Summa-Wolfe*



Above: San Benito rangelands support cattle grazing and wildlife habitat, and provide open space views. *Photo by Lynn Overtree.*

At left: Shoppers at the Pinnacle Organic Saturday farmstand enjoy the wide variety of vegetables and fruits that are available year-round.



PRESERVATION

A long tradition of protecting agriculture

The San Benito Agricultural Land Trust (SBALT) was formed in 1993, but its first acquisition was in 1997. The 68-acre "Branderburg Property" was protected from development through the donation of an agricultural conservation easement by the developer of the San Juan Oaks Golf Course.

This farm, currently producing lettuce mixes, is part of a large landscape of highly-productive soils and a strong agricultural industry. The partnership between the County of San Benito (which required the protection of this property to offset the loss of farmland to build the golf course), the developer of the golf course, and SBALT is an example of one way to balance multiple uses of the land.

Since 1997, this property has had different owners. Just like utility or road easements, a conservation easement remains in effect as land ownership changes. SBALT strives to develop constructive relationships with each



new landowner and visits properties annually to ensure that land use remains consistent with easement goals.

Landowner Steven Dobler says, "When we purchased the property, we were glad to learn that it was under a conservation easement. As farmers we appreciate people understanding the value of such productive farmland and taking the step to ensure that it will remain productive into the future."

Other Land Trust projects, shared in previous Mission Village Voice articles, followed this acquisition and amount to a total of 6,700 acres of protected lands under SBALT stewardship. Help us continue this success by joining us at www.sanbenitolandtrust.org/donate.

The Branderburg property



PRESERVATION

Cook Ranch Conservation Easement protects ranching and rural views

By Karminder Brown

Have you ever noticed the round, grass-covered hills northeast of the Tres Pinos Inn and the Tres Pinos Church parking lot? Or enjoyed an idyllic country bike ride along San Benito County's much-loved Quien Sabe Road? In either case, you are enjoying the public benefits of a San Benito Agricultural Land Trust (SBALT) conservation easement on a privately-owned, productive cattle ranch.

The 1,600-acre Cook Ranch is protected by a donated agricultural conservation easement established in 1997. The property's gently rolling hills provide some of the best livestock grazing in San Benito County. The easement also helps protect the Pajaro River watershed, wildlife habitat, and the rural vista southeast of Hollister for future generations.



The primary tool used by SBALT to protect agricultural land is the conservation easement, a negotiated agreement between the landowner and the Land Trust, which restricts non-agricultural uses of the land. SBALT inspects easements annually to fulfill its public responsibility with respect to compliance by the landowner.

In the case of the Cook Ranch, the seller donated the majority of the development potential of the land to SBALT concurrently with the sale of the land and obtained a tax deduction. Says Mitt French, fourth-generation rancher and manager of the neighboring Las Aguilas and Quien Sabe ranches, "If it fits our needs and preserves agriculture at the same time, it's a win for all."

To support the protection of more special places like the Cook Ranch, please donate to SBALT at www.sanbenitolandtrust.org. ■

The 1,600-acre Cook Ranch is protected by a donated agricultural conservation easement established in 1997.



Celebrating
SJB 150

PRESERVATION**Soap Lake Ranch has it all**

Cattle, wetlands, history, wildlife. It's all there at Soap Lake Ranch in northern San Benito County. How do you operate a cattle ranch where it floods? Where do ducks go if the lake is drained for pastures? How does a family run a business when water agencies have large infrastructure on its land? How does wildlife continue to move between the Diablo and Santa Cruz Mountain ranges across what is now farms, homes and roads?

The owners of Soap Lake Ranch know how to balance these potentially conflicting goals. One of their tools is a 1,025-acre conservation easement that they donated to the San Benito Agricultural Land Trust in 2014, with support from the descendants of the historic property owners, Jess and Warren Cornwell. By removing the development potential on all but 10 acres of the easement area, the new owners reduced their ongoing costs. The sellers gained assurance that their legacy of agriculture and wildlife values would be



protected forever.

Dave Brigantino, one of the new owners of Soap Lake Ranch, says, "As a third-generation farmer and rancher, I was born and raised in San Benito agriculture. It's a tough business to be in, especially with all the other pressures on the land. I'm glad we have a local Land Trust to help families like ours preserve this land and a way of life."

To support the protection of more special places like Soap Lake Ranch, please donate to SBALT at www.sanbenitolandtrust.org. ■

**PRESERVATION****Soap Lake Ranch, Part 2**

Last month we introduced you to Soap Lake Ranch – 1,025 acres of grazing land protected by an SBALT conservation easement – and why the landowners chose to preserve it. This month we'll highlight some of the ways this easement benefits us all.

Located north of Hollister, at the convergence of Pacheco Creek, Tequisquita Slough and Ortega Creek, the unique property serves an important function within the Pajaro River Watershed. Rain that falls in the Diablo Range drains to the ranch and spreads out across the ancient Soap Lake floodplain, recharging the aquifer that supports agriculture in the area. Protecting the land that absorbs these winter flows also provides flood protection benefits to our downstream neighbors in the communities of Pajaro and Watsonville.

Flooding during periods of heavy rains



turns Soap Lake Ranch into a natural wetland and an attractive stopover spot for migrating ducks, geese and

occasionally, White Pelicans. Year-round, the ranch provides habitat for many species of songbirds and raptors such as hawks, owls, kites and falcons.

For deer, bobcats, foxes, and other mammals, the property is a crucial link in a wildlife "corridor" between the Diablo and Santa Cruz Mountain ranges, allowing animals to move safely through a landscape criss-crossed with homes, highways and roads.

Soap Lake Ranch is a privately owned, working cattle ranch and is not open to the public. However, the entire watershed benefits from the stewardship of the landowners in partnership with your local land trust. Learn more or donate to SBALT here: www.sanbenitolandtrust.org. ■

PRESERVATION

SBALT permanently protects 27 acres of Phil Foster Ranch

By Karminder Brown

San Benito Agricultural Land Trust has protected 27 acres of Phil Foster

San Benito Agricultural



Ranch in San Juan Bautista with an agricultural conservation easement purchased with mitigation funds originating from two housing development projects in nearby Hollister.

As local fans of Phil and Katherine Foster's Pinnacle Organically Grown label already know, the farm is a leader in climate-friendly agricultural practices and enjoys a loyal customer following at the Saturday morning farmstand at 400 Duncan Avenue and the Hollister Downtown Farmers Market.

"Phil Foster Ranch is a stellar example of how farmers care for the land while producing food and providing jobs," says Dan Dungy, President of SBALT. "When we received mitigation funds from San Benito County and were charged with finding 27 acres of prime soils to protect with those funds, the Fosters were a natural choice to partner with us."

"This agricultural easement doesn't just conserve the natural resources that the Fosters steward so well – the soil, air, water, and wildlife habitat along the San Benito River – it also supports a local business that provides year-round employment to 50 people and access to fresh, organic produce for people of all income levels. It has been an honor for SBALT to work with the Fosters to preserve this farm that is such an important part of our community."

Phil and Katherine Foster have been farming organically for 30 years. They produce about 60 crops on 295 acres across two ranches, one in San Juan Bautista and the other in Hollister. They market produce at the farm on Saturday mornings, at farmers markets throughout the Central Coast and Bay Area (including downtown Hollister), and through regional retail stores and wholesalers.

SBALT is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization that works with landowners to provide financial tools to protect agricultural land.



Above: Packing shed, Phil Foster Ranch in San Juan Bautista. Photo credit: Lynn Overtree. At right: Pinnacle Organically Grown at Downtown Hollister Farmers Market. Photo credit: Rebecca Pearson

The Land Trust has applied for a grant to partially fund the conservation acquisition of the remaining 24 acres of the Phil Foster Ranch in San Juan Bautista. The rest of the needed funds must be raised by SBALT.

Supporters of this exciting project are encouraged to donate at www.sanbenitolandtrust.org. Double your impact by donating during the on-line San Benito Gives fundraiser September 1 through September 10. ■



SBALT REPORT

Second grant awarded for Phase II of Foster Ranch Conservation Easement

We have great news for farmland protection and fans of Pinnacle Organically Grown! SBALT has secured funding

San Benito Agricultural



from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Agricultural Conservation Easement Program to match a state grant for Phase II of the Foster Ranch conservation easement in San Juan Valley. With funding now in place, SBALT can move forward to preserve an additional 24 acres of Phil Foster Ranch, home of the popular Saturday morning farmstand. We are grateful to the USDA-NRCS, the California Department of Conservation, and Phil and Katherine Foster for the opportunity to ensure that the entire 51-acre Foster Ranch will remain in agriculture forever.

If you love these agricultural lands as much as we do, there are several ways to support SBALT this season...

The San Benito Commu-

nity Gives Auction takes place November 13th-17th, 2020. SBALT's eight auction items celebrate the agriculture and open space beauty

of our County: overnight stays at Paicines Ranch and Rancho Tranquillo, meat packages from Pasture Chick Ranch and Paicines Ranch, a horseback riding experience from our only local dude ranch, and more! Bidder registration opens November 2nd at givesanbenito.org/auction. Please tell your friends to register early and bid on these unique items in support of agricultural land conservation.

If you are on the mailing list, look for our Year-End Appeal in your virtual or physical mailbox and make a generous donation to

keep our organization marching forward into 2021. You can also contribute anytime through SBALT's website www.sanbenitolandtrust.org. Thank you for your support! ■



Phil Foster displays healthy orchard soil to NRCS Easement Program Specialist, Elizabeth Palmer, on a grant review site visit. Photo by Cathy Summa-Wolfe



Ponds at Rancho Larios provide water for livestock and wildlife.

SBALT NEWS

Rancho Larios preserves grazing, wildlife, and open space

By Karminder Brown

Rancho Larios is a 521-acre property located southwest of San Juan Bautista. The land was donated to SBALT in 2004 to permanently protect the open space that wraps around the Rancho Larios residential community.

In addition to productive cattle grazing, the foothills and wetlands of Rancho Larios host many species of wildlife and native plants. The property falls within the headwaters of the Elkhorn Slough and provides connectivity for wildlife to move between the Santa Cruz Mountains and the Gabilan Range. Its conservation value for wildlife will be enhanced by the protection of neighboring Rocks Ranch by the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County.

In December 2020, a 3-year lease was renewed with the grazing operator who runs Charolais cattle on the Rancho Larios property. As part of the lease renewal process, SBALT staff and board met with the operator and a rangeland conservation consultant to review the grazing approach, biological resources, fencing, and other infrastructure. Though it is similar to past leases, some



changes were made to improve the grazing contract for SBALT, the rancher, the residents of Rancho Larios, and the health of the land.

Although Rancho Larios is not open to the general public, SBALT looks forward to inviting donors to guided birdwatching or wildflower walks on this beautiful property, as soon as gatherings are permitted.

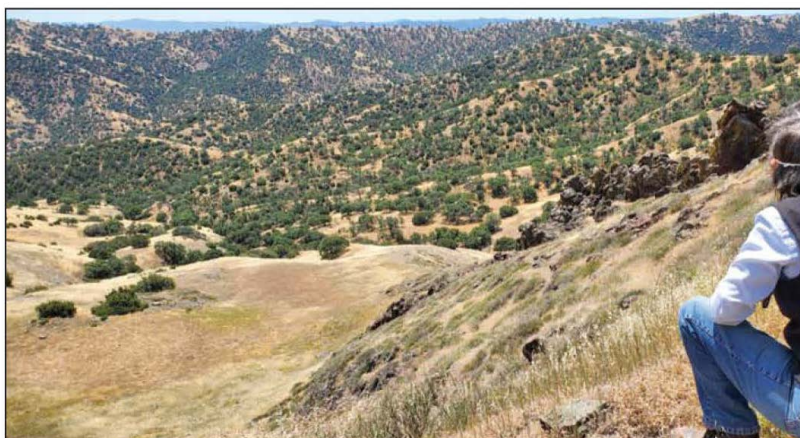
The mission of SBALT is to conserve regionally significant lands that sustain productive agriculture, preserve open space, and maintain the rural character of the county. Visit www.sanbenitolandtrust to learn about other lands protected by SBALT. ■



Rancho Larios hosts many species of native wildflowers, such as this Checkerbloom.



California mule deer captured by trail camera at Rancho Larios



View of distant ridgelines from the highest point on the Wilkinson Ranch. Photo by Lynn Overtree

SBALT REPORT

Wilkinson Ranch – Rugged beauty and working land protected forever

By Lynn Overtree

Not all SBALT lands can be seen from the road, like the Silva Ranch in San Juan Bautista and the Cook Ranch in Tres Pinos, but all sustain agriculture and conserve the rural character of San Benito County. The 3,173-acre Wilkinson Ranch is our largest easement, yet a small portion of the working rangelands that cover more than 500,000 acres of the County's scenic and ecologically rich rural lands.

Wilkinson Ranch is a working cattle ranch. The development rights were donated to SBALT in 2001, creating the conservation easement, which means the ranch will always remain in agriculture.

For SBALT staff and board, it is an honor to tour this remote property annually to monitor our easements. In May, after an hour's drive across adjacent rangeland, we

San Benito Agricultural



entered the ranch through an oak savannah valley. The canyon narrowed, guiding us up to the ridgeline. Along the ridge small

creeks carved their way down the hillsides. Standing on the highest point of the ranch, elevation 3,656 feet, our guide, Mark Klassen, said that on a clear day he can see all the way to the Sierra. He added, "Both our cattle and California oaks are doing well. Also, our cameras throughout the ranch show evidence of vibrant wildlife, including nocturnal protected species." Knowing the ranch is permanently protected by a conservation easement gives him confidence that the unique landscape and all the wildlife it supports will never be threatened by development.

To learn more about your local land trust, visit www.sanbenitolandtrust.org.



Guide Mark Klassen points toward the Sierra, visible on a clear day. Photo by Sara Steiner