

Nyland Ranch, 540 Acres, Protected with Amah Mutsun Access

In 2017, developers eyed the 540-acre Nyland Ranch in San Benito County, proposing a luxury hotel and even a Formula One racetrack.

Harvey Nyland, the three-time county sheriff who had inherited the ranch from his father, had died in 2008 after battling Lewy Body Dementia. His widow Gladys, a gifted piano player, legendary baker and consummate hostess, was 82.

That development never happened because the Trust for Public Land negotiated to buy the property for \$4.4 million in 2021, a year after Gladys died, protecting the oak-studded vistas near San Juan Bautista.

The property had been owned by the family for more than 75 years, but of course, centuries before, the land was home to the Amah Mutsun tribe.

On June 20, Trust for Public Land along with the San Benito Agricultural Land Trust, the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, and the Amah Mutsun Land Trust announced the permanent protection and conservation of the historic Harvey and Gladys Nyland property.

The Land Trust of Santa Cruz County purchased the agricultural conservation easement for \$1.8 million prior to the property being transferred to the San Benito Agricultural Land Trust subject to an Indigenous cultural conservation easement.

This announcement represents the long-time vision for the property.

"Conservation opportunities like this are rare and could not be done without partners," said Guillermo Rodriguez, California state director with Trust for Public Land. "We are incredibly proud to work with local land trusts to design and deliver a multi-benefit conservation outcome that ensures the natural health and indigenous, historic and agricultural heritage of this property are preserved for future generations to enjoy."

The Nyland Property is located across Highway 156 from San Juan Bautista. Here the grasslands, wetlands, and seasonal streams supported the indigenous Amah Mutsun people for thousands of years, before they were taken to Mission San Juan Bautista and Mission Santa Cruz as part of the Spanish conquest of California.

The property, currently leased for cattle grazing by 101 Equipment Co. and once the site of a land grant era 40-room adobe, provides a scenic western gateway to San Juan Bautista and San Benito County.



The 540-acre Nyland Ranch will be preserved for cattle ranching and wildlife with access by the Amah Mutsun people.

Photo Credit: John Nyland

"Permanent conservation of the ranch will ensure this land can support viable grazing operations that contribute to our local economy, feed people, and protect our scenic views," said Lynn Overtree, executive director of the San Benito Agricultural Land Trust. "We are excited about owning these 540 acres, which are adjacent to the 520-acre Rancho Larios Open Space that we have owned since 2004. Together with the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County's Rocks Ranch, there is a chain of protected working lands from the San Juan Road exit of Hwy 101 to the City of San Juan Bautista. We are honored to continue the Nyland family's loving stewardship legacy."

First Sunday Ranch Days

On the first Sunday of every month, members of the public are invited to join San Benito Agricultural Land Trust staff for a work party and or hike on their land.

San Benito County lacks the public park systems that are common throughout the greater San Francisco Bay area. The extensive open spaces in the county are generally privately-owned ranches without public access.

The San Benito Agricultural Land Trust calls their monthly events "Ranch Days" in recognition of the need to provide county residents access, and with it, a window to understand the importance of the working cattle ranches that are the foundation of the local agricultural economy and scenic beauty.

A unique intentional outcome of this project is not only protecting grazing land but establishing a framework through a cultural easement for the Amah Mutsun people to return to their lands.

The cultural easement will provide the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band special access to the property for cultural, spiritual, and ceremonial traditions. Their guidance will also facilitate restoration, conservation, and stewardship of the lands and waters using traditional and contemporary indigenous knowledge and methods.

"The Amah Mutsun people have lived in Popoloutchum, which is now recognized as San Benito County and beyond for millennia," said Valentin Lopez, president of the Amah Mutsun Land Trust and chairman of the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band. "Our ancestors worked to fulfill their sacred obligation to take care of Mother Earth and all living things for thousands of years. Today we are happy to return to Popoloutchum through this Cultural Easement. This easement will ensure this land remains undeveloped and intact. We hope to share our traditional indigenous knowledge and practices regarding land management with our partners and the public so we can all learn from each other."

Responding to the imminent sale, Trust for Public Land, with support from Wildlife Conservation Network and donors, stepped in to buy the property, providing time for local land trusts to work together to complete fundraising that ensures permanent protection and stewardship of the land.

The three local land trusts worked together to raise the funding to buy the property from TPL and will collaborate on an ongoing basis to steward and maintain its conservation and cultural values.

"The partnership between our organizations is what makes this project so

exceptional," said Sarah Newkirk, executive director of the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County. "This property is important for many different reasons – wildlife connectivity, agriculture, and cultural history and practice. We all bring something unique to the table, and our collaboration is what will make this conservation project a success."

An array of native plants and wildlife can be found on the ranch, as well as a historic barn. Besides providing valuable wildlife habitat, the property contributes to an important regional wildlife corridor linking the Gabilan Mountains to the Santa Cruz Mountains a few miles to the north.

"California is changing rapidly, so protecting open space for people and wildlife is more important than ever. Conserving the Nyland property is an important milestone that demonstrates how people are working creatively together to safeguard wildlife and ecosystem health," noted Neal Sharma, senior manager, California Wildlife Program of the Wildlife Conservation Network.

The Nyland property supports native habitat for raptors, migratory birds, and waterfowl along with mountain lion, grey fox, and bobcat. Several rare species live there including tri-colored blackbirds, American badger, and Western pond turtle.

Protecting this property from development aligns with California's ambitious climate goals and "30 x 30" initiative that calls for the protection of 30% of the state's land and coastal waters by the year 2030.

"Conserving and restoring this historic property to protected open space can help mitigate impacts from a rising climate by sequestering carbon in area wetlands and providing habitat for several endangered and threatened species and native plants, all while allowing managed public access and providing a cultural easement that honors the land and Amah Mutsun people who have called this home since time immemorial," said TPL's Guillermo Rodriguez.

Funds for the Harvey and Gladys Nyland Property's closing were made available through the California Strategic Growth Council's Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program in collaboration with the Department of Conservation. SALC is part of California Climate Investments, a statewide initiative that puts billions of cap-and-trade dollars to work reducing greenhouse gas emissions, strengthening the economy, and improving public health and the environment. ■