

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

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protected forever.

Dave Brigantino, one of the new owners of Soap Lake Ranch, says, "As a third-gen-

eration 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. ■





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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

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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. ■