



July 18, 2009

County General Plan snag delays money for ranchers for oaks preservation program

BY VALERIE GIBBONS

vgibbons@visalia.gannett.com

For Exeter's Tom Daly, running cattle on a sensitive oak woodland habitat is all about balance.

Daly grazes cattle on about 3,000 acres in several spots around the Tulare County foothills from Yokohl Valley to Three Rivers to U.S. Forest Service land above the snow line. Although he works with several landowners, from the federal government, to conservation groups to private ranches, he firmly believes that ranching and habitat protection can co-exist.

"We're interested in protecting the oaks, we're interested in the wildlife we're interested in all of those things," he said. "We all have the same goal: What's the best use of the property?"

A growing number of Tulare County farmers and ranchers seem to agree.

Conservation easements

About 11,000 acres on local farms and ranches in the county have been set aside in conservation easements since the beginning of the decade.

Those protected parcels known as conservation easements ' allow the landowner to receive cash for agreeing not to develop their land, cut down the trees or sell the water rights.

The program is strictly voluntary. Usually a rancher or farmer with a large amount of acreage would legally be able to put additional buildings on their land or parcel it off for development.

A conservation easement allows the landowner to receive the value of potential development in cash in exchange for permanently protecting land's resources, like water rights or clusters of oak trees.

The money comes from trusts like Visalia's Sequoia Riverlands Trust which is fueled by private donations from companies and foundations such as Southern California Edison, Packard Foundation and Alcoa.

"It acts as an incentive for the rancher who wants to continue ranching and get money for their operation," said Sopac Mulholland, executive director of the Sequoia Riverlands Trust. "We're not out there telling people what they can, or can't do with their land. It's strictly voluntary."

But there's a hitch. The money to pay for the easements is getting harder to find. So the Sequoia Riverlands Trust is hoping to tap into \$22 million from the state Wildlife Conservation Board.

The only thing standing in the way is the adoption of an oak management plan by the county Board of Supervisors.

Fifteen counties in the state have oak management plans, among them Fresno, Merced and San Luis Obispo.

"Each plan reflects the county's priorities," said Marilyn Cundiff, program manager for California's Wildlife Conservation Board. "We merely provide guidelines for landowners."

Each plan needs to identify the location of oak woodland habitats, what species of oaks are in the area and determine the habitat's threat from development.

But putting together a proposed countywide plan is easier said than done.

Mulholland has spent eight years on the project. First as a Board of Supervisor's appointee to the state's conservation board to ensure that any proposal avoided mandates and was strictly voluntary.

"I come from a ranching background, so I wanted to avoid anything that was too prescriptive," she said. "This allows people the chance to get cash in their pockets so they can re-energize their business."

Now the state's guidelines are in place, Mulholland has been trying to put the plan in front of county officials. They have sent copies to the county's Resource Management Agency and to the Planning Commission to no avail.

"I'm frustrated because this leaves us without a funding source, and we have people who are waiting to place their land into trust without any money to fund it," she said. "All we need is a conservation plan.

"We offered to write it for them," she added.

Eric Coyne, a Tulare County spokesman, said the board considers the oak management plan to be a priority, but any action needs to wait until another document, the master planning document for the entire county known as the General Plan, is completed.

The General Plan has been in development for years but is weeks away from being completed, Coyne said.

"We're so close and it's been so much work, they don't want anything to delay it," Coyne said. "But the board has expressed a strong interest in the oak management plan."

Meanwhile, Mulholland says three large ranches that would like to put conservation easements on their land are in limbo until a plan is approved by the county. The money to pay to preserve the land just isn't there.

"We want them to continue ranching on that land," she said. "Their land is their savings account and this is one way they can keep operating."