

California CWSRF Loans \$8 Million to The Nature Conservancy

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The Nature Conservancy of California recently received a CWSRF loan for the purchase of 12,362 acres (19.3 square miles) of rangeland in the Cosumnes River Watershed in southeast Sacramento County. The purchase of the Howard Ranch protects rare vernal pools (springtime wetlands) from the threat of increased development in one of California's most rapidly-growing areas. The Nature Conservancy plans to resell the land to a ranching company after placing conservation easements on the land that will assure minimal development or disturbance to the property in perpetuity.

The vernal pool communities found on the Howard Ranch only occur west of the Sierra Nevada. They span from southern Oregon to northern Mexico, occurring at lower elevations in the Coast Range and atop the clay soils of California's Central Valley.

These vernal pools host many rare flowers, invertebrates and amphibians adapted to extreme conditions - drought and summer heat, floods and winter freezes. Vernal pools also serve as important staging grounds for migratory waterfowl.

During the past 150 years, California's Central Valley has lost an estimated 75 percent of its vernal pools to land leveling, farming, aggregate mining and urban growth. If current growth continues unchecked, the Central Valley will lose half of its remaining vernal pool



acreage in the next 50 years. In the past three years, most of the property to the south and west of the Howard Ranch has been converted to vineyards using a plowing process (deep ripping) that destroys the vernal pools.

The Nature Conservancy considers vernal pool habitats to be the most vulnerable natural communities in the Cosumnes River Watershed. Many other local and regional planning efforts identify the protection of vernal pools in this watershed as a high priority.

The vernal pools on the Howard Ranch property are extraordinary for their integrity, density, and diversity. The property is one of the last large contiguous blocks of these natural communities that remains undisturbed.

Conservation goals for this property can be achieved at the same time that much of it continues to be used as rangeland. The Nature Conservancy intends to resell much of the property to a ranching company, subject to conservation easements held by

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The Nature Conservancy and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The easements will require the implementation of restoration activities detailed in management plans developed by those two organizations.

Mike Eaton, Director of The Nature Conservancy's Cosumnes River Project, said, "The Howard Ranch purchase... will protect water quality, maintain a wildlife-compatible agricultural enterprise, and keep the land on the tax roll.... Everyone wins."

California's State Water Resources Control Board provided \$8 million in CWSRF funding as part of the \$13.6 million project. Additional public and private grants came from a variety of

sources, including the Packard Foundation, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the State Wildlife Conservation Board, the North American Wetlands Conservation Council, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Reclamation.

This project is eligible for CWSRF assistance because it is consistent with both the California Nonpoint Source Management Plan and the San Francisco Bay/Delta Estuary Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan.. The CWSRF loan carries a 2.2 percent interest rate and has a repayment term of 10 years. The Nature Conservancy will repay the loan with funds from the resale of the land and its own resources.

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-Mike Eaton, The Nature Conservancy*

