

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

VALLEY TIMES ▸ SAN RAMON VALLEY TIMES ▸ WEST COUNTY TIMES

Conservationists buy grazing land in Irish Canyon

By Denis Cuff
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

A conservation group announced a deal Wednesday to buy a half-square-mile of spring-fed grasslands and oak forests north of Clayton, where county-approved growth limits scuttled plans to build housing.

Managers of the nonprofit group Save Mount Diablo said the \$1.34 million price for 320 acres is good for nature at a good price.

The grazing land in Irish Canyon, east of the Oakhurst Country Club and subdivision, has natural springs that feed wetlands and a pond for the threatened California red-legged frog and other rare species.

"This is a gem with tremendous wildlife values," said Seth Adams, the group's land programs director. "It's a very good deal."

Save Mount Diablo has made a \$450,000 down payment toward the purchase. Under the deal, the group has 21 months to raise the remaining \$894,000 through donations, government grants and other fundraising. Two Modesto doctors bought the land in 1988 for its investment potential to build upscale houses. Oakhurst was about to be built then. In 1990, Contra Costa County voters approved the urban limit line, blocking large-scale development on properties that, like Irish Canyon, are outside the limit line.

Sawtantra and Aruna Chopra say they are getting less than they expected when they bought the land to develop it. "I'm proud to lose money to Save Mount Diablo," Sawtantra Chopra said in a written statement. "It feels good that they will make better use of the property than I would in my lifetime." The Chopras marketed the land for its environmental value. They advertised it as red-legged frog habitat in hopes of selling it to a builder who needed to buy and preserve natural land to offset the environmental impacts of a housing project elsewhere.

"For a long time, landowners didn't want to advertise they had endangered or protected species (on their property) for fear of lowering the price," Adams said.

Save Mount Diablo heard about the property being up for sale last year and started negotiations. Acquiring the land will preserve a key piece of a wildlife travel corridor between Mount Diablo State Park and Black Diamond Regional Preserve, said Ron Brown, Save Mount Diablo's executive director. Without such corridors, wildlife species face a struggle to sustain their populations as new housing projects chop their habitat into pieces.

During a walking tour of the property earlier this week, signs of the springs were evident. Water gurgled through Irish Creek, splotches of runoff dotted the canyon walls, and the pond was full of cold water where red-legged frogs will breed in spring. Five coyotes ran across the hills, and hawks swooped overhead.

"The water in this generally dry area is what makes this area so valuable," Adams said. Water likely attracted settlers to the canyon in the 1800s, when coal was being mined a few miles to the north in Nortonville. Coal miners Lancelot Evans from Wales and William Atkins from England lived in homesteads on the Irish Canyon property in the 1800s. They traveled on a stagecoach road to the Nortonville mines. The canyon is believed to have gotten its name from Irish families who once lived in the upper reaches of the canyon, Adams said. The miners' houses are gone, but there is evidence of the water wells they dug and a gap in oak forests where they chopped down trees.

Save Mount Diablo typically buys land and turns it over to state or regional park agencies. It's unknown who the long-term owner will be for this property, Brown said.

Reach Denis Cuff at 925-943-8267 or dcuff@cctimes.com.

Published Thursday, Feb 8, 2007