

Eureka Times-Standard

We need to get creative in land conservation

Thursday, January 15, 2004 - Looking out on Humboldt County's vast open lands, it is difficult to imagine anything but a rural region forever. Never, some might think, will Humboldt County go the way of Sonoma and Marin. If history is a judge, this thinking is wrongheaded.

Instead, when looking out on Humboldt's green fields and forests, people should think "We still have a chance."

To date, most efforts to save large properties here have been to put them in public ownership, often at a substantial cost to the taxpayer and often to the detriment of local coffers that need property tax revenues. While undoubtedly public lands are critical for a variety of reasons, the endless acquisition of land by the government is a strategy that can be destructive.

Humboldt County lies on a hypothetical ridge. On one side is the growing threat of subdivision -- seen in many areas of Southern Humboldt -- which fragments wildlife habitat, requires roads which often end up poorly maintained, and stress ground- and stream-water resources needed for fish and other animals. On the other side of the ridge is government acquisition, which often precludes the productivity of the land and cuts into local revenues.

Between 1991 and 1997, the U.S. Census of Agriculture found that the number of full-time farms in the county dropped 13 percent, and the number of acres on working farms fell 13,000 acres to 584,538. This may be only a glimpse of things to come.

A survey produced by Ben Morehead and sponsored by the Humboldt County Farm Bureau and Humboldt State University found 40 percent of farmers and ranchers don't have an heir to continue their operations. Nearly half are nearing retirement, and some 50 percent -- representing more than 100,000 acres -- may sell their land within 15 years.

The question is before us: What will Humboldt become? A Del Norte County, with some 75 percent of land in government ownership? A Marin county, where land has been swallowed in the course of development?

The Nature Conservancy, the Save-the-Redwoods League and the North Coast Regional Land Trust, as well as government agencies, are meeting this week to develop strategies for land conservation. To be sure, these groups have expertise that can be valuable in the quest to keep Humboldt County's open spaces open. But it is incumbent on us all to learn the options available for conservation of land.

It is vital for landowners to consider ways to keep their land in production, and crucial for the public to help them do it. There are times when public acquisition of land may make sense, and times when a ranch or farm can be saved and kept private, yet still be a haven for wildlife and fish. There are also areas that should be developed smartly, preventing the ugly urban sprawl seen in so many places of this country.

It seems obvious that it should not all be one way or the other. We would not want to see Humboldt County dotted every 40 acres with homesteads. Nor would we see it all held by the government, making it a pretty place to visit, but a poor place to call home.

We applaud local leaders' efforts toward land conservation, and we urge them to keep pressing for creative ideas. The numerous private and non-profit groups Humboldt County is home to have also made great strides, and should push toward working together, compromising if necessary on their positions for the sake of getting things done. These processes should be played out as openly as possible.

Humboldt County has an opportunity to stay the jewel it is.

