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Saving the Ranch

**Conservation easement protects another
Sierra Valley ranch from development**

By Jenny Goldsmith

With real estate developers offering to buy his 725-acre Sierra Valley ranch, Russell Turner chose quite a different real estate decision. Aided by the Pacific Forest Trust and the Truckee-based Sierra Business Council, Turner signed an easement that assures no homes will sprout up on the hay farm and cattle ranch his family has owned for over 150 years.

Conservation easement signings like the one that recently paid the Turner family \$4 million have become an increasingly popular option for Sierra Valley ranchers that have little money in the bank, but are sitting on suddenly lucrative tracts of land.

Non-profits like the Pacific Forest Trust and Sierra Business Council have teamed up to offer the easements to assure that the open land and ranching heritage of the Sierra Valley are not splintered apart by rapid real estate development.

“The Turner Creek Ranch was clearly a very high priority project in the Sierra Valley,” said Steve Frisch, president of the Sierra Business Council. “It’s important that these ranching uses continue to preserve the historical significance.”

The Pacific Forest Trust — a nonprofit organization that seeks to preserve the integrity and productivity of America’s privately owned forests — holds the easement that prevents the parcel from being subdivided and developed but leaves the Turners as owners and managers of the land.



Aided by the Pacific Forest Trust and the Truckee-based Sierra Business Council, Russell Turner, pointing, signed an easement that assures no homes will sprout up on the hay farm and cattle ranch his family has owned for over 150 years in the Sierra Valley.

“I am grateful for my partnership with the Pacific Forest Trust, which has allowed me to protect my ranch and with it, the key to preserving my family’s way of life here in the Sierra,” Turner said in a news release.

The market value of the land was \$4.4 million, and the California State Resource Agency’s Sierra Cascade Conservation Grant Program awarded the Pacific Forest Trust a \$4 million grant for the acquisition of the easement. The Turner family donated the remainder of the

price, enabling the conservation group to make the purchase below market value.

“The idea is to make sure the land remains a working ranch,” said Megan Wargo, conservation project manager of the Pacific Forest Trust. “Our role is to make sure all of the restrictions put down by the easement are maintained to protect the property’s future.”

The Sierra Business Council contributed funds to assist with project development, planning assessment, and appraisal costs, said Frisch.

The business council was able to donate \$65,000 from a \$5 million grant received from the Packard Foundation in 2001, which was designated for land acquisition, Frisch said.

Sierra Valley Conservation Efforts

Turner Creek Ranch only constitutes 725 of more than 30,000 acres of Sierra Valley ranchland being guarded from the housing pressures of nearby cities.

In January 2006, two Sierra Valley ranchers signed agreements with conservation groups to prevent future development.

The owners of DS Ranch, an 8,000-acre spread, and Trosi Canyon Ranch, 1,360 acres of grazing land and prime deer habitat, signed conservation easements with Truckee-based Sierra Business Council, the Feather River Land Trust and the California Rangeland Trust.

The Sierra Valley

- The valley’s floor is approximately 100,000 acres.
- The entire floor is privately owned.
- The region supports half of all the plant species found in the state, and is home to more than 400 species of mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians.
- Over 30,000 acres of the valley is under conservation easements.
- The Sierra Valley is part of the Feather River watershed, a 2.5-million acre watershed that provides water to the majority of California.