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## Foothill ranchers await recession's end

State froze bonds to keep land from ever being developed.

By *MARK GROSSI*

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MARIPOSA -- The economic meltdown might soon claim an important piece of nature on a Mariposa County ranch that dates back to before the Civil War.

The struggling owners of the 4,000-acre Oakvale Ranch might have to sell a quarter of their land unless public or private funds are secured soon to permanently preserve it.

And if they are forced to sell, it opens the door to speculators who might build houses and roads.



MARK CROSSE, Merced Sun-Star - Photo by MARK CROSSE / THE FRESNO BEE

Bob Thomas, left, and Gary Preston walk across their ranch that lies between Raymond and Mariposa.

"We really want to keep this land intact and keep development out," said Bob Thomas, who is married to one of the Oakvale owners. "But we don't know how long we can hold on."

It is one of many recession dramas unfolding in California's foothills, a vast ecosystem that helps filter the state's water as it flows down rivers and creeks to reservoirs and residents' taps. Most of the state's threatened animal and plant species can be found in foothills, biologists say.

As the recession lifts, there may be tens of thousands of foothills acres waiting for developers to buy from desperate landowners.

Ranchers are trying to preserve their property by getting state bond funds through conservation easements -- money in exchange for legal commitments to never develop the property, no matter who owns it in the future.

But California froze the sale of such bonds in 2007. Many landowners, like the Oakvale ranchers, took out loans to get by until the bond money became available again last year.

But the process is slow. One family in Napa County got an easement this year, just in time to keep the property. Similar stories are cropping up in Shasta and Sonoma counties.

Some owners couldn't wait any longer and were forced to sell, said Darla Guenzler, executive director of the Sacramento-based California Council of Land Trusts, representing 70 trusts in the state. "It's a shame," she said. "We have lost time and opportunities."

Many other ranchers -- who collectively own 200,000 acres all along the 400-mile Sierra -- are working with land trusts and conservancies. The tough times are bringing together environmentalists and ranchers, groups that sometimes are adversaries over land use.

This year, for instance, the James Irvine Foundation, known for environmental causes, awarded \$125,000 to the California Rangeland Trust, a nonprofit land trust led by rancher and chief executive officer Nita Vail. She is the first rancher to ever receive such recognition from the Irvine Foundation, Rangeland Trust spokeswoman Erin Davis said.

But will the Preston family, owners of Oakvale Ranch in Mariposa County, find enough funding fast enough to save a slice of their property?

The ranch near Eastman Lake at about 1,200 feet elevation is a gentle, oak-studded transition between the Valley floor and the Sierra's higher elevations. Some of the land is leased for grazing. It will become important as a natural corridor for animals moving to higher ground as the climate warms.

The Prestons' predicament started in the 1980s. Needing money, the family sold a 922-acre piece of the property to a Mariposa County resident who had no intentions of developing it.

But the parcel came up for sale four years ago, and the Prestons feared it would be bought by speculators who would build large developments.

The family, which does not make much money from the property, obtained a \$1.2 million loan and approached the California Rangeland Trust to help with a conservation easement to pay it off.

A scramble began to find more than \$2 million for the easement, which would pay off the loan and cover the associated fees.

Over the past three years, more groups have joined the search for funding. They include the American Land Conservancy, a national nonprofit group, and the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, a state agency that doles out bond funds.

The family, which has been connected to the land since the 1850s, is making six-figure payments on the loan each year. Family members just obtained another \$100,000 loan for payments this year. So the property is safe for another year.

"We want to see this property stay this way for future generations," said Thomas, the family spokesman. "For everyone, really."

The groups have put together about half the money through the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, said Edward Stanton, San Francisco-based program manager with the American Land Conservancy.

But to complete the easement, they need to get the other half of the funding. Otherwise they probably will lose the money already granted by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy.

The good news is that the Prestons have made their loan payment this year. In addition, there are not very many developers buying land right now, Stanton said.

"Land trusts are the only game out there for the moment," he said. "But the bad news is that land trusts can take up to five years to get an easement. It's just a slow process."

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