

SPRING
2015



... to protect the land forever

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Marsh mounds break the surface of the nearly 600 million gallons of freshwater that flooded into our new 1,000-acre wetland during the strong December rainstorms. Photo by Stephen Joseph Photography.

It seemed fitting that, as the sun set on
New Year's Eve at Sears Point, the only sounds
emanating from the new wetland were ones
that no one had heard there in more than a
century — thousands of birds calling, landing
and taking flight. Nothing more.

— Julian Meisler, Baylands program manager

Surprise! Sears Point landscape changes ahead of schedule

Where there was land, there is now water. Unexpected water. Fresh water. Last December's strong storms filled our newly constructed tidal basin with rainwater to everyone's delight — especially the birds, who seemed to locate it within hours. While we didn't expect water to flood the basin until we breached the old levee, still scheduled for this fall, who could complain? Like the birds, hundreds of people flocked to see the remarkable transformation on the open days and hikes we offered. Westbound drivers along Highway 37 gasped at the dazzling new topography as they crested the hill. The whims of Nature provided us with an entertaining interlude. But soon, we will need to empty the basin in preparation for letting in the tidal waters that belong there. The way it once was and will be.



A NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

So much is at stake

I am drawn to rivers and landscapes. Conserving special places and the deep connections people have with them is where my values lie and it's the work about which I am passionate.

To protect natural resources, from the Mayacamas west to the coastal headlands, and from San Pablo Bay north to verdant valleys, the stewardship and outreach actions of Sonoma Land Trust are critically needed now more than ever. At stake is a clean water supply, fish and wildlife for our children to enjoy, fresh local food systems and access to healthy outdoor experiences. This opportunity has me excited to join you, working together, to preserve our unique natural and cultural history in ways that make a difference in our everyday lives.

Sustaining the success of Sonoma Land Trust and advancing its mission is the best tribute we can give to Ralph Benson, my accomplished predecessor, and to all who are champions of our cause. It's a privilege for me to join this team of dedicated leaders serving on the board of directors and SLT's professional and spirited staff. With an eye to the future, we will continue our conservation efforts and engage people from diverse age groups as well as cultural and economic backgrounds.

I look forward to getting to know those who make our work possible — our contributors, volunteers and partners. I'm interested to hear your thoughts and ideas. After all, the outcome of what we do at Sonoma Land Trust is the expression of what's in the heart and soul of the people of our community.

See you out there!

Dave Koehler

OUR MISSION

The Sonoma Land Trust protects the scenic, natural, agricultural and open landscapes of Sonoma County for the benefit of the community and future generations by:

- Developing long-term land protection strategies;
- Promoting private and public funding for land and conservation;
- Acquiring land and conservation easements;
- Practicing stewardship, including the restoration of conservation properties; and
- Promoting a sense of place and a land ethic through activities, education and outreach.

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Who we are



Meet our new executive director

BY SHERI CARDO



New executive director Dave Koehler (left) was presented with a prominent award from former Interior Secretary Ken Salazar in 2011.

Dave Koehler considers himself a lucky guy. Growing up along the San Joaquin River in Fresno and living to fish, he dove from banking into a new career 25 years ago that allowed him to save the river he loved. Now, with the San Joaquin River Parkway and Conservation Trust flourishing, this award-winning conservation leader was ready for a new challenge and recognized Sonoma Land Trust as the right place to put his well-known skills for innovation and collaborative conservation to work.

“My wife, Sharon, and I have always enjoyed visiting Sonoma County, but while interviewing for this position, I started to look at the county through a new lens,” says Dave. “With an eye toward the future, I saw all the opportunity that still exists here to partner with local communities in advancing land conservation.”

He mentions the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor as an example. “While I’d read about this key Land Trust project, driving through the valley, I could feel

the importance of it, of all that is at stake if it’s not protected.”

Dave, whose last name is pronounced Kay-ler (although he’s pretty easy-going about that), developed an effective coalition of regional, state and national conservation organizations that protected more than 4,000 acres along the San Joaquin River, their “National Waterway” — and introduced tens of thousands of people to the river and the land. In 2011, his two decades of work to establish a 23-mile greenway of protected lands, parks, trails and river access were recognized by former Interior Secretary Ken Salazar, who presented him with the prestigious Partners in Conservation Award.

“There is a strong connection between conserving land, restoring waterways and providing opportunities for people to enjoy these open spaces,” says Dave.

Asked what it’s like to be moving to a new part of the state at this point in his life, Dave says, “It feels exciting! Sonoma

County is a wonderful place. And our kids broke the ice for us. They both graduated from San Francisco State and stayed in the Bay Area. We’re tagging along!”

“I am thrilled that our board of directors selected Dave Koehler to be the executive director,” says former executive director Ralph Benson. “Dave built a great organization with a reputation for solid conservation and innovation. He is just the person to lead Sonoma Land Trust at this point in our evolution.”

Dave is a graduate of California State University at Fresno with a degree in environmental biology. He started his new job at SLT on April 16 and is anxious to get to know our members and partners. Stay tuned for opportunities to meet him in person!

Sheri Cardo is SLT’s communications director.

“With an eye toward the future, I saw all the opportunity that still exists here to partner with local communities in advancing land conservation.”

Cultivating a new generation of stewards on the land

BY SHERI CARDO



The sky was overcast and the air fragrant with grass and expected rain. Brightly colored jackets and backpacks flowed rapidly across gullies and over the hills while children's voices soared high above the calls of ravens and red-tailed hawks. Tolay Creek Ranch was full of young life on this mid-February morning.

Soon, the frenetic kid energy was harnessed as an adult called them into a "quiet" circle in the shadow of a venerable oak. There, they (and I) learned to carry a shovel straight down, to keep their gloves on except for when they break for lunch and other essential tips the youngsters needed to stay safe on the land. These kids were part of STRAW: Students and Teachers Restoring A Watershed (a program of Point Blue Conservation Science), and they had a very important job to do.

One of the Land Trust's key goals for Tolay Creek Ranch is to restore the native trees and shrubs along the creek. Finding ways to involve the community is primary to achieving our mission. "Working with STRAW helps us accomplish both," says stewardship director Bob Neale. "This is STRAW's biggest project — installing more than 3,000 trees and native plants over five years. We are changing our landscape and our community by working together with these kids and teachers."

Teacher Gena Richman of Mary Collins School in Petaluma's Cherry Valley has been part of the program for several

years, and says on behalf of her colleagues: "We all feel really strongly about getting our kids outside and doing important work. Look at them — they're all being and feeling useful. It's a powerful way to have kids participate in our community."

The STRAW staffers take turns teaching the small teams how to plant properly, which takes several steps. First, the kids have to scrape a big enough area clear of vegetation for their particular plant, be it coffeeberry, California blackberry or blue elderberry — all plants that also serve to create fruits and berries for wildlife. Then they have to place their plant level with the ground and make sure it's secure. And then they have to put down cardboard as a weed barrier, along with burlap, staples and, finally, deer caging. Lastly, they are told to call out loudly for "plant inspection" when they're done — which they do enthusiastically.

"We're using lots of teamwork today," says STRAW restoration biologist and project manager Isaiah Thalmayer. "Restoration is hard work!"

This is the third year of our partnership with the child-centered watershed restoration group. Over the past two years, the students have planted trees, as nine-year-old Evelyn Zacks is quick to list: "Buckeyes, valley oaks and willows." This is her third year planting along Tolay Creek and she knows what she's doing. "It's a lot better to choose a spot farther

from the water because of the clay," she declares.

Several moms and dads also accompany the children to coach them along, but are careful not to take over. Evelyn's mom, Charlene Barr, exclaims, "I love this program. I grew up in Petaluma and played in the creeks, so it seems like I'm back at her age playing in the creeks!"

All of the rowdiness from earlier has worn off; the children are quiet and intent. When one team accidentally separates a plant from its roots, everyone can hear their sad "Oooh." But that's a rarity.

Soon it's time for lunch and the children proudly traipse over to their backpacks.

STRAW was formed 23 years ago over a simple question posed to a 4th grade classroom: "How can we save the shrimp?" Before they knew it, those students were planting native willows along Stemple Creek and beginning to restore the habitat of the endangered California Freshwater Shrimp. Today, approximately 3,500 students participate in 50 restoration workdays each year and, this past March, STRAW celebrated its 500th restoration to great acclaim at Tolay Creek Ranch. The Land Trust was excited and honored to share that huge milestone.

"Having a classroom outside gets all the kids engaged," exudes Richman. "It's magical in my mind."

To learn more about STRAW, please visit pointblue.org.



Top right: Evelyn Zacks. Bottom right: Isaiah Thalmayer addresses the circle. Photos by Scott Hess Photography.

Two of the Land Trust's key goals for Tolay Creek Ranch are to restore the vegetation along the creek and to involve the community.

A lifetime of curiosity, a gift from the heart

BY JOHN McCAULL

“I just trust being in nature. It allows me to slow down, take the time and appreciate all the richness.”



PHOTO BY JIM JOHNSON

Sharon Bard has always been curious and has dedicated her life to translating that curiosity into positive action. As a special education teacher and principal in the 1970s–80s at an Alameda County school serving severely disabled students, Sharon saw firsthand the impact of the social safety net being torn away. The dramatic decline in federal spending for the care of the developmentally disabled pushed new responsibilities onto states and local agencies to develop programs for which they were unprepared and

underfunded. What Sharon learned about people with special needs would help shape a worldview concerned with the well-being of the disenfranchised and giving a voice to those “at the bottom rung.”

The natural world has also resonated with Sharon. “I just trust being in nature. It allows me to slow down, take the time and appreciate all the richness.” Sharon first connected with Sonoma Land Trust in 1992, and has been a donor and supporter ever since. After selling some property last year, Sharon had an opportunity to make a major charitable contribution to an organization in which she believed wholeheartedly. “SLT was a top contender,” Sharon says, “because I really liked and trusted the operation of the organization.” In interviewing the Land Trust to consider us for her financial contribution, Sharon asked tough questions and honed in on our work for shaping the future of the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC).

“Once I started talking with Ralph Benson and John McCaull, I realized that

there was a clear match between my passion for helping two, seemingly discrete causes that don’t traditionally have strong voices. Just like those with developmental disabilities, the endangered species, the rivers and the parts of nature we think of as separate from us also need a champion and advocate.”

Last December, Sharon made her decision: a \$100,000 contribution to Sonoma Land Trust for our work in crafting a vision and new future for SDC. Sharon continues to advise us on the expenditure of her funds and her words continue to inspire us. “To me, understanding and valuing the web of life is not just about protecting nature distinct from people, but it must also be linked to how we treat our most vulnerable in society.”

Thank you, Sharon!

John McCaull is SLT’s land acquisition project manager focused on the Sonoma Valley.

Enlisting landowners to aid safe passage for wildlife

BY SHERI CARDO



Rosalie and Mark Johnson live within the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor. Their property is nine acres in size, but its significance to the wild animals of the region is many times greater because the Johnsons live in the corridor “pinchpoint” — the narrow and vital connection along the Valley floor that is part of the larger wildlife linkage spanning from Lake to Marin Counties.

Like many landowners in the area, the Johnsons are excited about the prospect of helping wildlife move through the corridor — and, in their case, through their backyard! Our research is indicating that the wildlife corridor is functioning and there is room for improvement, but they didn’t even wait for the results. As soon as they realized they lived in an imperiled section, they took action by significantly reducing their fencing.

“We enjoy witnessing wild animals pass through our property on their way to meeting a mate or feeding their young. It’s a privilege to live here and we feel a strong sense of responsibility to our wild neighbors,” says Rosalie.

Funded by the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor Management and Monitoring Strategy was developed over

the past two years by Land Conservation Services and SLT stewardship manager Tony Nelson, himself a wildlife ecologist. The report lays out a number of simple approaches that landowners in the corridor — and almost anywhere — can employ to help wild animals move through an area, such as:

- Remove unnecessary fencing and use wildlife-friendly fence designs where fencing is necessary
- Restrict pets from roaming freely in wild lands and keep them indoors at night
- Keep pet food indoors
- Minimize outdoor night lighting
- Avoid use of pesticides and rodenticides
- Manage vegetation to meet State fire-safe guidelines while maintaining adequate vegetation for wildlife cover
- Within wildlife corridors, avoid agricultural conversion of native land cover and create native plant hedgerows in cultivated agricultural fields
- Consider placing restrictions, such as a conservation easement, on your property that would ensure lasting protection of wildlife habitat and passage
- Minimize new road construction
- Manage recreation and access on public

lands within wildlife corridors to minimize the adverse effects of human presence and activity on wildlife

We are putting these recommendations into action at our properties in the corridor pinchpoint — at Glen Oaks Ranch, Stuart Creek Hill and Stuart Creek Run. For example, at 270-acre Glen Oaks, our stewardship staff is removing old, non-functional fencing to prevent animals from becoming entangled; reducing the area that is mowed and/or leaving areas of taller vegetation to provide cover for wildlife; and reviewing the lighting around the home site (note that if motion-detector lights are necessary for security, they should be focused on houses rather than pointing out at the land).

“Humans and wildlife can and do coexist when we take fairly simple, common-sense measures,” says Tony. “We just need to be extra thoughtful and give wildlife an edge within critical movement corridors.”

If you are interested in learning more or taking action on your property, check out SLT’s Corridor Management and Monitoring Strategy report at sonomalandtrust.org or contact Tony at (707) 526-6930 ext. 120.



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Sonoma Developmental Center — A priceless landscape

Imagine the Sonoma Developmental Center without its spectacular backdrop of Sonoma Mountain, cascading streams, stately oaks and the open sweep of its meadows. More than 700 acres of open space land creates a sense of place and beauty for residents of SDC and for all of

us who travel through the area. Scratch the surface and you discover the abundance and diversity of habitats at SDC that contribute to Sonoma County's designation as one of the most biologically diverse regions in the United States.

This place, which has provided a home for our most vulnerable citizens, also provides a home for more than 100 bird species, 11 species of amphibians, 16 species of reptiles and 40 species of mammals. The property is a refuge for special-status animals, including freshwater shrimp and steelhead trout. It is recognized as a critical link in the wildlife

corridor stretching from Marin to Lake Counties. For the residents, families and staff of SDC's health care facilities, the land provides serenity and a place for exercise and discovery, including an occasional view of the wildlife who live or pass through there.

The future for the residents and employees at SDC is inextricably linked to protection of its open space lands. Join us at the May 2 *Transform SDC* meeting to learn more about why SDC matters so much to the ecology and the people of the Sonoma Valley.



For more information, visit sonomalandtrust.org/sdc
or call (707) 526-6930 ext. 123

The future of SDC is in our hands

With a growing push to close SDC for economic reasons, we invite the community to learn more about this unique resource and participate in charting a course away from closure and towards a transformed and revitalized community center.

Transform SDC Project Community Workshop: *Project Introduction and Community Visioning Launch*

Saturday, May 2

9AM–1PM

Vintage House

264 First Street East, Sonoma

The **Transform SDC Project** is a project of Sonoma Land Trust and the Sonoma Developmental Center Coalition, with generous funding from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, Impact100 Sonoma, Sonoma County and private donors.