

WINTER 2017



... to protect the land forever

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Fire damage at the top of Glen Oaks Ranch in the Sonoma Valley. Photo by Tony Nelson.

THE STATE OF OUR LANDS AFTER THE FIRES

BY HEATHER AH SAN

Sonoma Land Trust is so thankful for the outpouring of concern we received in the wake of the recent North Bay firestorm that devastated our community. We know many of you have been concerned about the state of the lands and wildlife we work so hard to protect, and are anxious to help however you can.

As of this writing, a month after the fires, your land trust is still in the early stages of assessing the total impact to our properties. Our approach to caring for our landscapes is to “do no harm” – meaning, we want to fully understand the effects of the fires before deciding how we will respond. Though it’s still

early in our evaluation, we are optimistic. Nature endures.

“Fires will always be part of our landscape,” says Bob Neale, stewardship director. “We believe that the fire impacts we are seeing on our preserves is within what’s considered normal for these

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A NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

THE GREATEST PEOPLE ON THE PLANET

We were heartened by the immediate response so many of you showed by jumping in to help out with building local fire relief funds and volunteering to meet community needs – everything from food and evacuation shelters to horse rescue operations. And we were inspired by the 300+ attending our Heart of the Land event in October, where we so much enjoyed gathering and sharing stories with our land trust community.

The land defines us geographically and shapes us socially. Each of our supporters is unique and supports us in their own wonderful way. Riffing on a Paul McCartney song, *Average Person*, I have a question to ask: “Look at the average (Sonoma Land Trust supporter), can you imagine the first one you’d meet?”

I was talking with a successful tech investor who wants to use his talent and wealth to conserve land in Sonoma County. He became inspired by John D. Rockefeller’s purchase and donation of land to Grand Teton National Park.

I met a young man who is a senior at Sonoma State University. He grew up in the Springs area of Sonoma Valley and played a critical role in developing our Bay Camp last summer. Once, he saw a clear path for his future – but he is a DACA student and now there is uncertainty in his way. But he is a leader and he’s using his skills to address immigration issues among the SSU student body.

I know an organic farmer who has deep roots in Sonoma County. Her livelihood is

farming, but she reflects on the critical role the farm’s protected forests play – they bring clouds that bring rain that keep clean water in the farm’s healthy streams. Yes, you heard it right: She sees nature as a full partner on her farm.

You are indeed the greatest people on the planet. With every day that goes by, we express our sincere gratitude for you and the unique ways you help advance our cause. “Look at the average (Sonoma Land Trust supporter), can you imagine the first one you’d meet?”

DAVE KOEHLER
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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BRINGING BACK THE BAYLANDS TO HIGHWAY 37

BY WENDY ELIOT

Sonoma Land Trust has been engaged in conservation and restoration along the Highway 37 corridor in Sonoma County since the 1980s. Our primary goal has been to restore the marshes that historically fringed San Francisco Bay. Over the past few years though, implementing this seemingly simple goal has become much more complex. We must plan for a whole array of issues: rising sea levels, uncertain sediment supply, increasing salinity in our

address sea level rise, traffic congestion, transit options and recreational activities.

Sometimes referred to as the “flyway highway,” Highway 37 passes through one of the most important sections of the Pacific Flyway for migrating birds. As a community, we recognize that these wetlands are vital as habitat for endangered species, buffers against flooding that threatens homes and infrastructure,

groups that have spent decades rebuilding the North Bay’s system of marshes.

Sonoma Land Trust initiated formation of the SR 37 – Baylands Group, comprised of wetland land managers, ecological restoration practitioners and others committed to ensuring that the highway redesign is compatible with and advances the ecological restoration and conservation goals for the San Pablo Baylands. The Baylands Group, now led by the State Coastal Conservancy, is working closely with transportation planners to advance a plan that integrates highway improvements with existing and future habitat planning, conservation and restoration.

This is an **OPPORTUNITY** *of a* **GENERATION**

groundwater, flooding and State Route (SR) 37 – the primary transportation route across the North Bay.

Highway 37 spans the northern arc of San Pablo Bay, connecting Solano, Napa, Sonoma and Marin Counties. Some 40,000 cars use the road each day and traffic is severely congested during the morning and evening commutes. Were it not so aggravating to sit in snarled traffic, commuters might enjoy the expansive vistas of farm and ranch lands and the tens of thousands of acres of natural and restored tidal wetlands.

SR 37 would perhaps not have been built in its current location had planners understood the importance of the tidal wetlands that it traverses and the certainty that sea level rise will bring catastrophic flooding to the roadway. This was on display in early 2017 when a section of the highway was closed in both directions for more than three weeks due to flooding from extreme high tides and heavy storms.

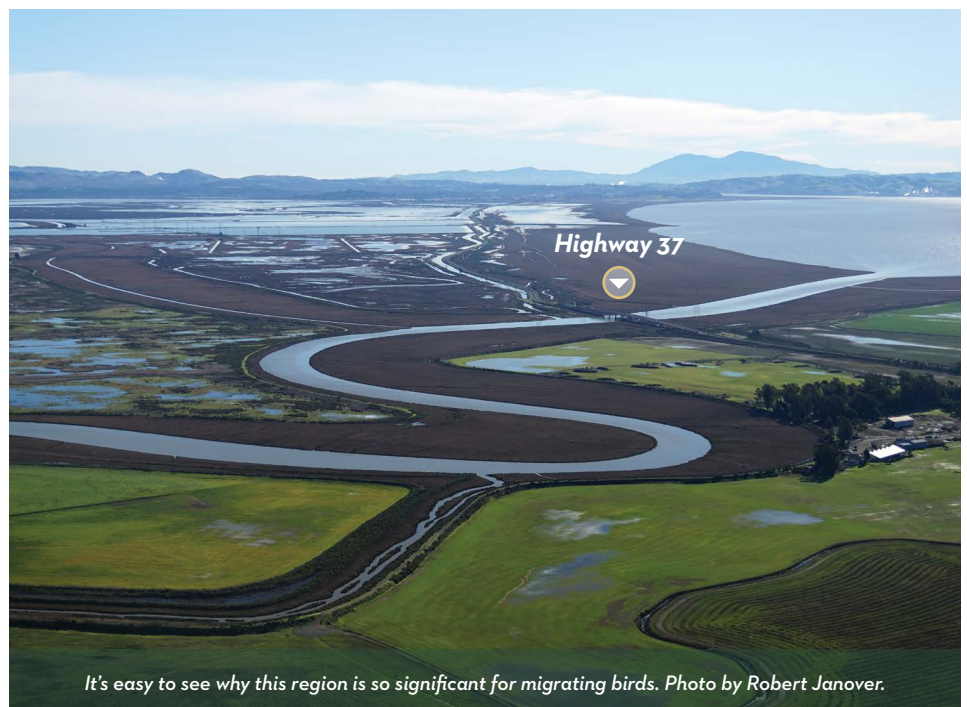
In 2015, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, local transportation authorities and elected officials of Marin, Sonoma, Napa and Solano Counties initiated planning for a redesign of SR 37 that will

filters that clean polluted waters entering the bay, and some of the most beautiful places for recreation on the west coast of North America. The Land Trust and many of our partners are implementing an ambitious plan to restore marshes here and reverse the loss of 75 percent of San Pablo Bay’s original tidal wetlands.

The redesign of SR 37 provides an unprecedented opportunity for collaboration between transportation agencies and

This is an opportunity of a generation. With sound planning, we can do both: Improve the SR 37 transportation corridor and establish a climate-resilient ecosystem in the San Pablo Baylands. Investment in long-term resilience now will pay enormous dividends for future generations.

Wendy Eliot is SLT’s conservation director.



It's easy to see why this region is so significant for migrating birds. Photo by Robert Janover.

fire-adapted natural landscapes.”

In total, the fires burned to varying degrees on 13 of our preserves and conservation easement lands, for a total of 3,000 acres. Please read on for more about the state of our lands.

GLEN OAKS RANCH AND SONOMA VALLEY

Most of our preserves in the Sonoma Valley were burned by the fires that raged through the area. The preserves affected include Stuart Creek Hill, Secret Pasture and Glen Oaks Ranch.

We are relieved to report that fire crews stopped the fire burning on the eastern edge of Stuart Creek Run so that the restored property was not damaged by the fires. Our entire 14-acre adjacent Stuart Creek Hill property did burn, however. Though all the grasses burned and blackened and some trees suffered damage, most of the mature trees survived and we believe that the oak

woodlands on the property will respond favorably to what was a moderate intensity burn at that location. Infrastructure loss was minimal — one gate was lost, but, thankfully, our neighbors’ homes were saved.

Secret Pasture, a remote 340-acre preserve located in the hills above Glen Oaks Ranch, burned pretty thoroughly. We will be assessing hazardous trees on the property at least until spring to determine which trees survived, which trees died, and whether any pose a safety hazard. Even blackened oak trees can often still be alive, so we need to wait to see. Additionally, even dead trees, if they don’t pose safety hazards, provide important habitat for a variety of birds and animals.

Glen Oaks Ranch suffered the greatest infrastructure damage. The historic stone barn, only recently repaired and seismically improved in 2012, was destroyed, as well as our well pump house and our

woodshed. We are very grateful, however, that the historic stone mansion and ranch house were saved thanks to the tireless efforts of the firefighters.

“The fire intensity was low to moderate and we are already seeing plants sprout and wildlife returning to their routines,” says Sonoma Valley program manager Tony Nelson.

It was heartening to see, thanks to our critter cams, that wild animals were moving safely under Highway 12 again shortly after the fires and we’ve seen no signs of animals having perished on our properties. We believe that lands within the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor provided them safe passage to flee the fire. Sadly, our neighbors at Bouverie Preserve suffered a large loss, as many of their buildings were destroyed. Nonetheless, they were happy to report that the mountain lions they had collared appeared to have survived on the other side of the valley!

Cougar Mountain at Sears Point Ranch on fire the night of October 8. Photo by Steve Pye.



SEARS POINT RANCH IN THE BAYLANDS

If you drove Highway 101 south of Petaluma, or Highway 37, after the fires, you undoubtedly saw the shockingly charred visage of Cougar Mountain. Almost all the grasslands north of Highway 37 burned, as did most of Cougar Mountain. The fire also burned Sears Point Ranch on the southern side of Highway 37, which we donated last year to the San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge. Fortunately, the buildings — including our Ralph Benson Center at the Baylands — were unharmed, as was a herd of cows thanks to the kind neighbors at Paradise Vineyards who cut their fences to get them to safety. The wetland restoration area was also untouched and the Bay Trail is still open.

Though we lost a lot of fencing, our stewardship staff believes that the grass fire was of relatively low intensity and that the vegetation will respond favor-

ably. Indeed, within a couple weeks, fresh green vegetation was already sprouting on the mountain and pastures, and we think the wildflower display next year might be exceptional.

“The fire burned our fences and it brought hardship to our ranchers, but from an ecological standpoint, it is likely to be very beneficial for the grasslands at Sears Point,” says Baylands program manager Julian Meisler. “I’m really looking forward to seeing what emerges in the spring.”

LIVE OAKS AND LAUFENBURG RANCHES

These two Knights Valley properties, while close to each other, were impacted quite differently. Thankfully, our historic Laufenburg Ranch did not burn. Some trees were damaged as a result of high winds, but the fire was stopped at our boundary and neither wild lands, crops nor buildings burned.

The fire did burn all 572 acres of Live Oaks Ranch, affecting both the natural environment and the farmstead. The intensity of the fire was fairly low across the grass and through the woodlands, and many of the property’s oak trees appear to be alive and in good condition, although we are still assessing the fire’s full impact.

“We think the land will respond positively in most areas and we are working with experts to address natural resource concerns appropriately,” says project manager Trevor George.

If it were not for our newly complete, fire-safe bridge, the ranch might have suffered much greater infrastructure loss. With the Tubbs Fire licking at the walls of the ranch’s two homes, firefighters were able to save both of them just in time. Thankfully, the occupants had left earlier; we did, however, lose several outbuildings and our staff is working diligently to clean up hazardous debris.

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In the shadow of Mt. St. Helena, all 572 acres of Live Oaks Ranch burned, but the major buildings survived thanks to firefighters and our fire-safe bridge. Photo by Corby Hines.

\$2 million challenge to protect the land forever

Many thanks to Fran Conley, Rob Das and Beth Berkson who have together contributed \$1 million and challenged us to raise another \$1 million by December 31. When you donate to Sonoma Land Trust this season, you make a tremendous impact—helping address immediate needs on our preserves and promoting land management practices that make our community more resilient.

Thank you!

To give, please use the enclosed envelope or go to: sonomalandtrust.org/give

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Nature endures



In the wake of the 2017 firestorm, there is a lot to grieve and a lot for which to be thankful.

Photo by Don Brubaker, USFWS-Refuges.

OUR CONSERVATION EASEMENT LANDS

Our hearts go out to all landowners impacted by the fires, including those whose properties are protected by a conservation easement held by Sonoma Land Trust. A total of eight SLT easement properties burned to varying degrees. We are working with these conservation easement landowners to support them in their efforts to assess impacts and plan for any rebuilding. Our staff is visiting each easement in order to document the fires' impacts to the conservation values of the protected properties and to help landowners navigate their options moving forward.

Conservation easement program manager Crystal Simons says that because of the human impact of the fires, SLT's response to easements differs from our approach to our preserve properties. "We're working with our easement landowners as partners, and doing our best to support them both emotionally and logistically," she says. "Being in nature can be healing, and we're already seeing rebirth and rejuvenation on many burned landscapes."

In the wake of the 2017 firestorm, there is a lot to grieve and a lot for which to be thankful. This is a human tragedy, a catastrophe on a scale we aren't used to. We will work together as a community to build a stronger and more resilient Sonoma County. In terms of the land itself, at this early stage, it seems that the fires' impacts may not be so catastrophic. It's too early to know for sure, but because the landscapes of Sonoma County evolved with regular wildfire, we expect that most of our affected properties will bounce back even healthier than they were in some cases. Time will tell. For now, along with doing the necessary cleanup and tending to the immediate needs of the land, we are turning our attention to helping our region prevent such devastating fires in the future. Stay tuned.

Heather Ah San is SLT's communications coordinator.

FRAN CONLEY: PROMINENT SURGEON AND LAND PROTECTOR

BY HEATHER AH SAN

As a middle child, Fran Conley has never seen herself as “distinguished,” and yet, throughout her life, she has distinguished herself as a pioneer — first, through her trailblazing work as the fifth woman in the country to become a board-certified neurosurgeon, and then through her headline-grabbing resignation from Stanford Hospital.

At 77 years old, Fran isn’t done championing causes in which she believes. Standing outside her Sea Ranch home just steps away from the Pacific Ocean, she talked to Sonoma Land Trust staff about why she’s championing protecting the land forever.

“It’s important to preserve the land,” says Fran. “The land influences people.”

It was at Stanford where Fran gained recognition for her work as a neurosurgeon starting in the 1960s — a time when, for many women, the obstacles to entering the medical field were numerous. In 1991, she drew further public fame for her resignation from Stanford Hospital in protest of sexist attitudes and sexual harassment she said female staffers continuously endured, which later led to Stanford adopting new policies to combat these issues and, subsequently, her return.

More than two decades later, Fran hasn’t tired of advocating for issues about which she is passionate. Earlier this year, Fran worked with the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST) to transfer ownership of her parents’ property from a private conser-

of Sea Ranch. When she’s not running through the magnificent local redwoods or swimming miles at her community center pool, she’s rallying her neighbors to donate conservation easements on their properties. She has the foresight to see what’s at risk of happening to the land she loves if we all don’t act now to protect it.

“Things have changed a lot since the ’70s with the influx of people. We don’t need more development ... People need to wake up to the fact that if there’s not a good preservation plan and the ability to do it, we’re going to lose the magic of this beautiful place,” she says.

Fran Conley, Rob Das and Beth Berkson have together contributed \$1 million and



Photo by Corby Hines.

Fran’s love of the land started at a very early age growing up in a family whose love of science and the outdoors would have a long-term influence on her life. A native of Palo Alto, Fran had two homes growing up: the Stanford University campus where her father was professor of geochemistry, and her parents’ beautiful 191-acre property in the Santa Cruz Mountains.

vation easement to a public property with the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District. She generously donated proceeds from the transaction to POST as well as to Sonoma Land Trust, which is now her local land trust.

With seemingly endless energy and purpose, Fran has become something of a spokesperson for the preservation of open space land at her coastal community

challenged us to raise an additional \$1 million by December 31. These funds will help us move forward on our portfolio of land protection projects throughout the county, as well as heal the damage on our preserves caused by the recent fires. Your donation, added to this community challenge, will have tremendous impact — just like Fran!



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RESTORING HAIRE RANCH TO TIDAL MARSH

BY SHERI CARDO

The restoration of Haire Ranch is underway less than four years after Sonoma Land Trust purchased the 1,092-acre property on Skaggs Island and transferred it to the San Pablo Bay National Wildlife Refuge. "That is lightning speed for wetland restoration," SLT conservation director Wendy Eliot says admiringly of the Refuge's efforts.

Longtime Land Trust supporters will remember that restoring 4,400-acre Skaggs Island along Highway 37 to wetlands was a holy grail of conservation projects, prevented for years by Haire Ranch on the island remaining in private hands. However, SLT's 2013 acquisition of Haire Ranch finally made the restoration possible.

Working with the National Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), which is funding the restoration and also provided the lion's share of the \$8.3 million acquisition funding, and with Ducks Unlimited, which is constructing the project, the Refuge has the big goal of recreating the tidal marsh as it had been for millennia up to barely 100 years ago.

"Skaggs Island was one of the last places in the area to be diked and drained

for land," says Don Brubaker, Refuge manager. "I've seen maps from as late as 1909 when it was still tidal marsh!"

Restoring all of Skaggs Island will be an enormous effort, so the Refuge started with the smaller Haire Ranch portion this past October. Brubaker says that this project is much simpler than our Sears Point restoration. "It's very similar," he says, "but we're not moving nearly as much dirt as you guys had to. We don't need to protect a highway or rail line, so there's no big levee needed, and the channels and swales that they're excavating are much smaller."

Completion of the project is planned by next September and waterfowl and shorebirds are expected to fly in very quickly thereafter.

"We're basically building a seasonal wetland on Haire that will be supplied with rainwater cached in a reservoir that will be built on the old Navy portion of the island," says Brubaker. "The birds are going to love it!"

Sheri Cardo is SLT's communications director.

OUR MISSION

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.