

PRESERVATION

Cook Ranch Conservation Easement protects ranching and rural views

By Karminder Brown

Have you ever noticed the round, grass-covered hills northeast of the Tres Pinos Inn and the Tres Pinos Church parking lot? Or enjoyed an idyllic country bike ride along San Benito County's much-loved Quien Sabe Road? In either case, you are enjoying the public benefits of a San Benito Agricultural Land Trust (SBALT) conservation easement on a privately-owned, productive cattle ranch.

The 1,600-acre Cook Ranch is protected by a donated agricultural conservation easement established in 1997. The property's gently rolling hills provide some of the best livestock grazing in San Benito County. The easement also helps protect the Pajaro River watershed, wildlife habitat, and the rural vista southeast of Hollister for future generations.



The primary tool used by SBALT to protect agricultural land is the conservation easement, a negotiated agreement between the landowner and the Land Trust, which restricts non-agricultural uses of the land. SBALT inspects easements annually to

fill its public responsibility with respect to compliance by the landowner.

In the case of the Cook Ranch, the seller donated the majority of the development potential of the land to SBALT concurrently with the sale of the land and obtained a tax deduction. Says Mitt French, fourth-generation rancher and manager of the neighboring Las Aguilas and Quien Sabe ranches, "If it fits our needs and preserves agriculture at the same time, it's a win for all."

To support the protection of more special places like the Cook Ranch, please donate to SBALT at www.sanbenitolandtrust.org. ■

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