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# Trust saves grassland from sprawl

## State, group buy San Joaquin ranch for \$3M

By Reed Fujii  
Record Staff Writer

A conservation easement now protects the 2,235-acre W.F. Cook Cattle Co. ranch in eastern San Joaquin County from development, even as adjoining properties are being chopped up into rural residential "ranchettes."

What's being preserved is

grassy grazing land that transitions from flat Central Valley land on the west to rolling Sierra foothills to the east, said Erik Vink, a coordinator for the Trust for Public Land, which helped bring together the conservation project. There are a couple of reservoirs that provide water for cattle and seasonal vernal pools on the ranch's eastern quarter.

"It's that very interesting place where the Valley gives way to the western extent of the foothills," Vink said.

"In this case," he noted, "If you look directly west across

Escalon-Bellota Road, that former ranch property is now in 40-acre ranchettes."

Owner William Cook, who is also a Stockton business, farm and real estate attorney, said his primary aim was to stop that sort of sprawl.

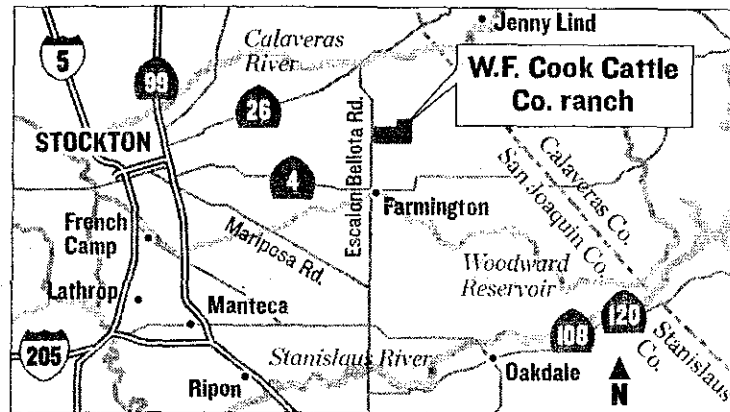
"I've ridden around out there for 20 years, and to me it was worth preserving," he said.

And over that same period of time, he's sought some sort of permanent conservation deal, but until now, agencies were not interested in preserving the nearly treeless grassland, didn't

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## Ranchland secured

A conservation easement protects the W.F. Cook Cattle Co. ranch from development.



RICK HUDOCK/The Record

## RANCH: Land sold for less than \$1,600 an acre

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have sufficient funds, or were interested in protecting only a portion of the ranch.

The easement essentially involved selling future subdivision and development rights to the Cook property. Officials with the California Department of Conservation said the state paid \$1.7 million, the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service kicked in another \$1.3 million, and the Cook family forgave or "bargained" roughly \$500,000 of the easement's value.

State funds came from bonds approved by voters in 2002 under Proposition 40, said Charles Tyson, manager of the California Farmland Conservancy Program.

The price of the easement may seem large, but it is due primarily to the large block of land involved.

Tyson said conservation

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easements on irrigated cropland can run anywhere from \$4,000 to \$9,000 an acre. At \$3.5 million, the Cook Ranch easement is less than \$1,600 an acre.

California Rangeland Trust, a nonprofit organization, will hold the easement and make annual visits to ensure the land remains protected.

The trust has more than 183,000 acres under its watch, primarily grazing lands for cattle, sheep and horses, spokeswoman Erin Lacy said.

"To conserve 2,200-plus acres in the Valley is tremendous in itself, the Valley being the hot spot for development pressures," she said Monday.

Certainly the \$3 million Cook received is far less than he might have realized had he subdivided the ranch and sold it off

piecemeal.

"Did they pay me a lot of money?" he asked rhetorically. "Sure they did."

"But did they get value for that? Sure they did."

"Development got stopped, open space got preserved, and they paid for it," Cook said.

The Cook Ranch is just eight miles west of Orvis Ranch, a 2,500-acre property that was protected in 2006 by Calaveras County's first conservation easement. Cook said news reports about the Orvis project led him to contact the Trust for Public Land for a similar easement.

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