

Ag group will manage part of Coast Dairies land

By **BRIAN SEALS**

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A Watsonville-based agricultural education group has agreed to take over a portion of the former Coast Dairies property on the county's North Coast.

Agri-Culture would manage about 550 acres of farm land on the **DAVENPORT** 7,000-acre site, officials with the group and the Trust for Public Land said last week.

Five years after buying the property, the Trust for Public Land is poised to transfer the land to state and federal management, as well as to Agri-Culture, early next year, trust spokeswoman Mary Menees said. The trust had hoped to complete that process by the end of this year.

Agri-Culture president Bill Ringe said the group's board would be reviewing

responsibilities that come with the role, but that the board was eager to begin.

"The main thing for us is to continue farming on that property," Ringe said. "There is 100 years of farming out there. We don't want to lose that."

Aside from that, Ringe said the "opportunities were endless." Agri-Culture works to educate the public about the role of farming in the county's economy and histories. Agri-tourism and education efforts are among the opportunities that come with managing the land.

"It's an exciting thing. This may be a blueprint for this type of land conservation," Ringe said.

Under the plan to transfer ownership to government entities, the Bureau of Land Management will oversee inland portions of the land, while the state Department of Parks and Recreation will manage the

coastal areas, which include about seven miles of beach.

The move to include a third owner came after the BLM said this past summer that it would not manage farm land and housing on the property. That forced the trust into a last-minute scramble to find another taker.

"They'll be taking over 550 acres," Menees said. "We're absolutely thrilled."

Some issues still linger, though. Water availability and rights for farmers have been issues for the past year. The county has been working on securing water rights and has applied for a \$300,000 Coastal Conservancy grant to aid in that process, Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt said.

"I definitely think work on the water application should proceed, but if there is a private owner it is probably appropriate for them to make the application,"

Wormhoudt said.

Wormhoudt said she supports keeping farming alive on the property, but had questions about the implications of a private group assuming ownership of part of it. Granting part of the land to a private group could potentially trigger county general plan and environmental review requirements, she said.

Using a combination of privately raised and state bond money, the Trust bought the Coast Dairies property in 1997 for \$43 million and has spent the past five years developing a management plan for the land. The land had been threatened with development of houses, which led to opposition and efforts to buy the land for preservation.

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