



Tarmo Hannula

Two herons in Harkins Slough, near the wetlands parcel the Open Space Alliance is hoping to buy.

Wetlands parcel looked at for purchase

43-acre Cordoza Ranch wanted for wildlife preservation

By VICTORIA MANLEY

STAFF WRITER

WATSONVILLE — A county organization is looking to purchase a parcel of wetlands along Harkins Slough, and is seeking financial support from the community.

The Open Space Alliance of Santa Cruz County has kept its eyes on the 43.6 acres of wetlands for purchase for approximately one year, said Director Mary Tsalis. The land is just east of the slough and west of Highway 1, rich with wetlands species and plants, as well as encompassing about 18 acres of farm that Tsalis said would be preserved as agricultural land.

"When we first saw the land, it was such an ideal site for wetlands preservation," Tsalis said. "You can see both east and west of the sloughs."

The price is currently being determined by appraisal, Tsalis said, after which the alliance will engage in negotiations with the owners of the land. Zelma Cordoza is the trustee of the Cordoza family trust, which owns the land — the family originally asked for \$950,000.

Tsalis said land of that size and condition would normally go for approximately \$600,000, but because the parcel is located next to the once-controversial Tai property the Watsonville City Council was looking to annex into its city limits, the owners anticipated a higher value. However, the city voted against pre-zoning the Tai property, and "it doesn't look like that city's going to go in that direction anymore," she said.

When the alliance — which is under the umbrella of the Environmental Council of Santa Cruz County — was created in 1995, 14 environmental and preservationist organizations "gathered to identify land so precious that it needed to be preserved," Tsalis said. "We

'When we first saw the land, it was such an ideal site for wetlands preservation.'

— Mary Tsalis

wanted to preserve as much wetlands as possible."

Tsalis said the Cordoza Ranch was the perfect opportunity, and the alliance decided to get to work on purchasing the parcel before any developments became underway. "We wanted to make a proactive effort to preserve rare habitats in the county," she said. "We did not want it to be too late... (or) to be in a negative fight."

Tsalis said the alliance is not looking to create any sort of controversy or adverse relations with developers. "We didn't want to stop development as much as we wanted to preserve wetlands," she said. "That kind of habitat has been diminishing significantly."

According to the alliance, there are nine bird species known to feed in the wetlands area, including merlin, golden eagle, short-eared owl and sharp-skinned hawk. There may also be the Santa Cruz long-toed salamander, the Southwestern pond turtle and the red-legged frog. The tarplant, which only exists in a few areas of Watsonville and is considered endangered in the county, is on the slopes of the parcel.

The alliance is hoping to preserve the land as an "interpretive" learning base for visitors, and to "allow people to view a preserved wetlands" as well as a preserved farm, Tsalis said.

The alliance has already begun raising funds for purchase.

See WETLANDS, page 10

WETLANDS

From page 1

The Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors has reserved \$200,000 to help fund the purchase, and the alliance will be holding a Wetlands Habitats Celebration & Art Auction Oct. 24.

The celebration, organized by alliance member Cyndi Van Tassel, will feature the work of more than 30 artists including Cheryl Doering, Deborah Eddy, Terry Hogan and Mary Warshaw. It will be from 7 to

10 p.m. at the McPherson Center for Art & History, 705 Front St. in Santa Cruz. Tickets for the event are \$20 if purchased in advance, which can be done at either Bookshop Santa Cruz in Pacific Garden Mall or the Environmental Council office at 1001 Center St. No. 14 in Santa Cruz. They will \$25-\$50 at the door.

The evening will include the artwork, live music, wine and hors d'oeuvres, a slide presentation on wetlands habitats, a poetry reading and the auction. For more information, call the Environmental Council at 426-2286.