

ELKHORN SLOUGH: Groups seek to preserve diverse habitat

'One ownership, One protection'

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Quinn White of the Elkhorn Slough Foundation walks Monday on the Porter Marsh property that the foundation acquired.

Wetlands
By DONNA JONES

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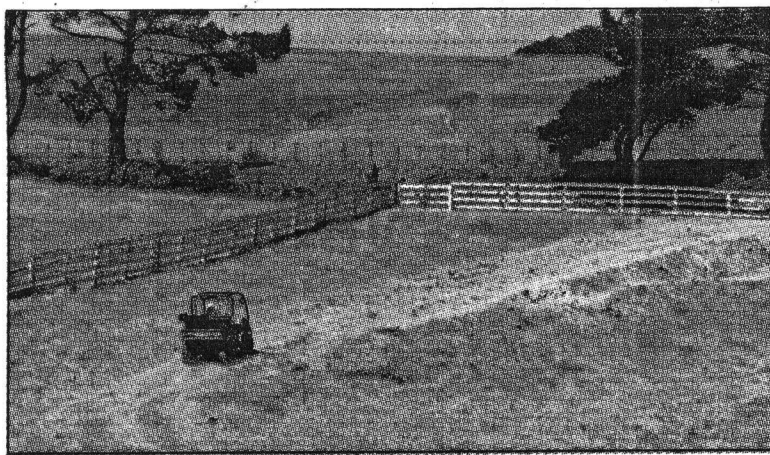
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ELKHORN SLOUGH — From the porch of the farmhouse on Porter Ranch, the view of marshlands gives way to a glint of the waters of Elkhorn Slough.

For decades, the Nature Conservancy has been acquiring property in the area for long-term conservation, from oak-studded coastal prairie to tidal wetlands. Monday, it turned several parcels, including the Porter Ranch on Hall Road, to the Elkhorn Slough Foundation for permanent protection.

The 750-acre gift represents the largest single transfer of conservation lands in the history of Elkhorn Slough, and the increase to its holdings makes the foundation the largest landowner in the watershed.

"It puts nearly 3,600 acres under one ownership, one protection," said foundation spokeswoman Lorili Toth.

That's important, Toth said, because Elkhorn Slough is the one of California's few surviving tidal wetlands and one of its largest. Its seven-mile stretch also provides uniquely diverse habitat. The largest concentration of California sea otters lives in and



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Some of the only remaining native California grasslands are on the Porter Ranch property near Hall Road in Las Lomas. The ranch will continue to raise grass-fed beef on the property after the Elkhorn Slough Foundation takes the deed to the ranch.

AT A GLANCE

ELKHORN SLOUGH CONSERVATION

WHAT: The Nature Conservancy transfers 750 acres of protected land to the Elkhorn Slough Foundation.

WHY: To ensure seamless management and preservation of nearly 3,600 acres of critical wetlands and watershed habitat.

WHERE: Several locations in the 45,000-acre watershed along a seven-mile stretch between the Moss Landing Harbor and Hall Road.

DETAILS: www.elkhornslough.org

SLOUGH

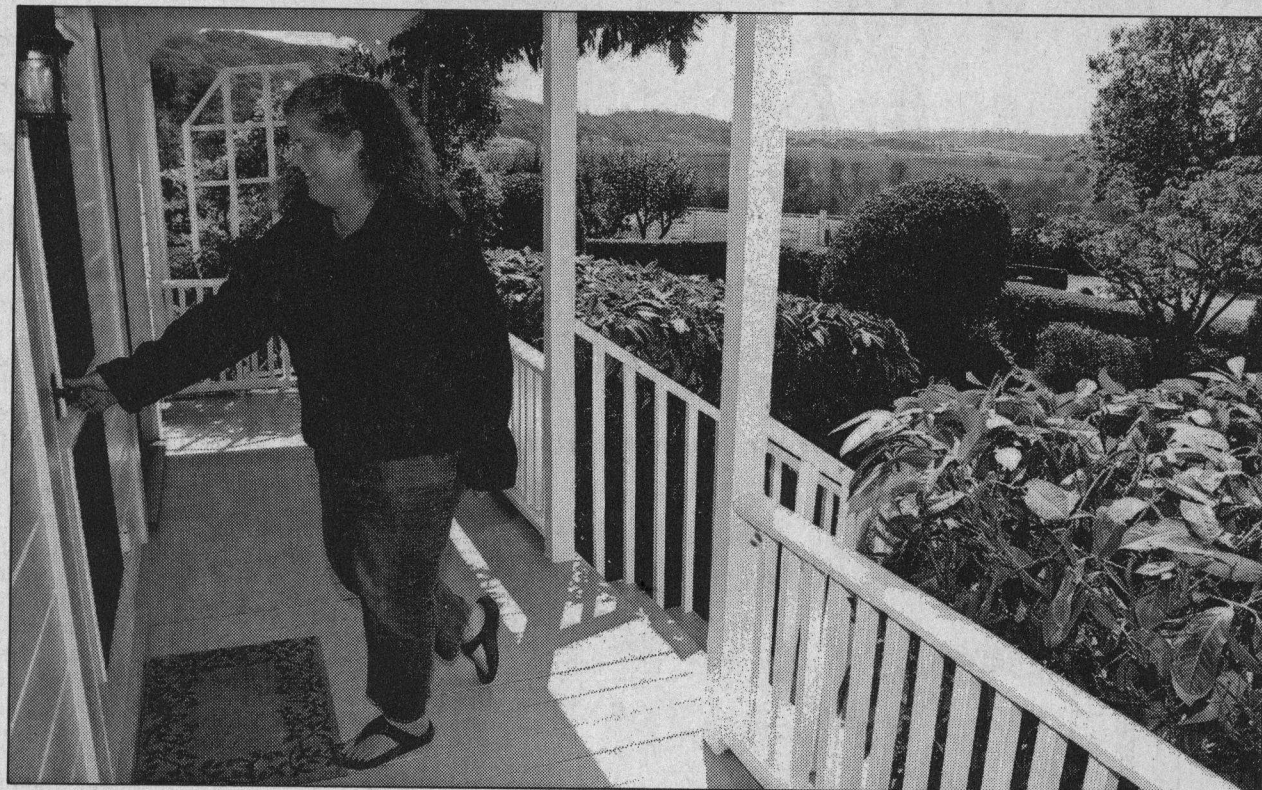
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around the slough. The Santa Cruz long-toed salamander, considered endangered by federal authorities, and the California red-legged frog, listed as threatened, call it home. Hundreds of migrating and resident bird species depend on it.

Organic strawberries are grown at its edge, and cattle graze on its grassy uplands. Kayakers enjoy its waters, hikers its trails. More than 100 scientists are involved in research projects, and environmental education programs attract teachers and students from throughout the region.

It's a place where "nature and people intersect in a positive, productive way," said Mark Silberstein, the foundation's executive director.

The Nature Conservancy made its first purchase in the area in 1971 to protect wetlands from major development. Through the years, the group increased its holdings through gifts and easements, first along the water's edges and then, recognizing the importance of the entire watershed, farther up into the hills that surround the slough.



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Monique Fountain, director of the tidal wetlands project at Elkhorn Slough, stands on the porch of the Porter Ranch house Monday. The house is included in the property now being transferred to the Elkhorn Slough Foundation.

The foundation has managed The Nature Conservancy's properties for 20 years. Laura Smith, the Nature Conservancy's Central Coast project manager, said adding the land to the local group's portfolio long has been a goal to enable seamless management and preservation.

Both the partnership between the two preservation groups and the evolution of the Nature Conservancy's acquisitions are models for future conservation, Smith said.

"It's a legacy in some many ways," she said.

Other agencies also pro-

tect land in the area. The 1,740-acre Elkhorn Slough Reserve is managed by the state Department of Fish and Game in cooperation with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The state Moss Landing Wildlife Area protects another 728 acres. Additional

land is under the protection of the Moss Landing Harbor District and the Monterey County Parks Department. In all more than 8,000 of the watershed's 45,000 acres are protected.

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