

'For sale' signs spring up on the north coast

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FOR DECADES, the spectacular views and chill beaches of Santa Cruz' north coast have drawn visitors from around the world.

But the rolling landscape has also been a magnet to land developers over the years, and only furious community resistance has prevented several huge projects, including a nuclear power plant and a city of 10,000 homes, from being built atop the open farmland.

Despite the past victories of conservationists, recent announcements that 10,000 acres of prime North Coast land are for sale have raised fears that the area is again facing threats from development.

Local planners, real estate salespeople and state officials say that restrictive zoning of the coastal area has essentially forbidden large, high-density development on the north coast. But single homes on large agricultural parcels are allowed under current zoning, and may become increasingly common in the future.

Over 7,000 acres of oceanfront land stretching between Laguna Creek and Scott Creek have been put on the market for \$15 million by the Coast Dairies and Land Company. The 2,300-acre Grey Whale Ranch, which lies between Wilder Ranch State Park on the coast and UC Santa Cruz, has been listed for \$11 million by its owner, Sequoia Forest Industries. And several smaller north coast ranches of 200 to 400 acres are also for sale, according to local Realtors.

Though the land is zoned for agriculture, the high asking prices have apparently put it out of the reach of local farmers. And if the farmers can't afford to stay on the land, can the developers be far be-

hind?

"There are very, very tight (land use) restrictions out there. You won't see any condos going up," said Leroy Rockelman, the Realtor who is handling the sale of the Grey Whale Ranch. Instead, several potential buyers have proposed building a small number of expensive homes on the property, he said.

Though the Grey Whale is zoned for 'timber production' in the county's General Plan, that zoning allows one home per 40 acres of land. Portions of the property that also fall within the coastal zone would be limited to one house per 160 acres, according to Bob Leggett, a program manager for the county Planning Department.

A task force created by Assemblyman Sam Farr, D-Monterey, and State Sen. Henry Mello, D-Watsonville, has been seeking funds to purchase the ranch for a state park, but some state officials concede that such a purchase is pretty unlikely right now.

"Land is becoming extremely expensive," said Jim Fife, a local supervisor for the state Parks and Recreation Department. "The state can't buy everything ... at this time there are no plans to purchase more land."

"If Mello can't find the money to buy Porter Sesnon (a parcel in Aptos that is being sought as a park) where will he get the money for the Grey Whale?" asked Dave Loomis, assistant director of the local office of the Coastal Commission.

Because the Coast Dairies property is located right on the coast, the land is subject to even stronger restriction than the Grey Whale Ranch, Leggett said. Most of the



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The spectacular north coast is losing agriculture to high land values. Expensive homes may be next option.

north coast is zoned "coastal prime agricultural land," Leggett said, and current zoning requires that the land stay in agriculture. Subdividing agricultural land is also very difficult, he said.

However, the 7,000-plus-acre property is already divided into about 30 parcels, many of which have existing homes and farm buildings on them. Theoretically,

each parcel could be sold individually and developed into "ranchettes" or homesites.

An investment group from Texas now holds an option to buy the property, but has given no indication of what it plans to do with it. The present owners, a group of Swiss investors, are selling the land because its current agricul-

tural use isn't returning enough to justify its investment.

While low-intensity residential use would probably remove some agricultural land from production, splitting existing large holdings into parcels doesn't necessarily mean farming is in danger of extinction on the north coast. But it could mean that different types of farming will be explored.

New types of agriculture such as mariculture or profitable specialty crops could eventually replace brussels sprouts and artichokes on the north coast, according to Steve Siri, president of the county Farm Bureau.

"If the county wants agriculture out there, they'll have to accept different kinds (of agriculture)," Siri said.

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