

# Deal keeps wetlands and farms



PATRICK TEHAN - MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

Wetlands on the Tai property in Watsonville provide habitat for a snowy egret and other waterfowl. The property on the west side of Highway 1 will be purchased by the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County and preserved.

## Wetlands

### TRUST BUYS FERTILE SANTA CRUZ COUNTY PROPERTIES

By Paul Rogers  
Mercury News

The largest privately owned wetlands area in Santa Cruz County — a sprawling mix of marshes, willow trees and bulrushes thick with mallard ducks, egrets and other wildlife — will be protected under a unique agreement announced Monday that pairs farmers and environmentalists.

Under the deal, the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County will pay \$14.5 million to acquire 486 acres west of Highway 1 in Watsonville.

Much of the land is owned by Vincent Tai, a developer with offices in San Francisco and Hawaii. It was at the center of a bitter controversy that began in 1995 after Tai proposed building 1,800 homes, a golf course and retail shops there, sparking lawsuits from environmental groups and an eventual voter-approved measure that limited new development on Pajaro Valley's rich farmland.

"These lands have a big impact on water quality and water supply. They are important for migratory waterfowl. Now they'll have permanent protection," said Terry Corwin, executive director of the nonprofit Land Trust of Santa Cruz County.

The uplands portion of the property is currently being farmed by four farmers who have leased the ground to grow strawberries, cauliflower, lettuce and broccoli.

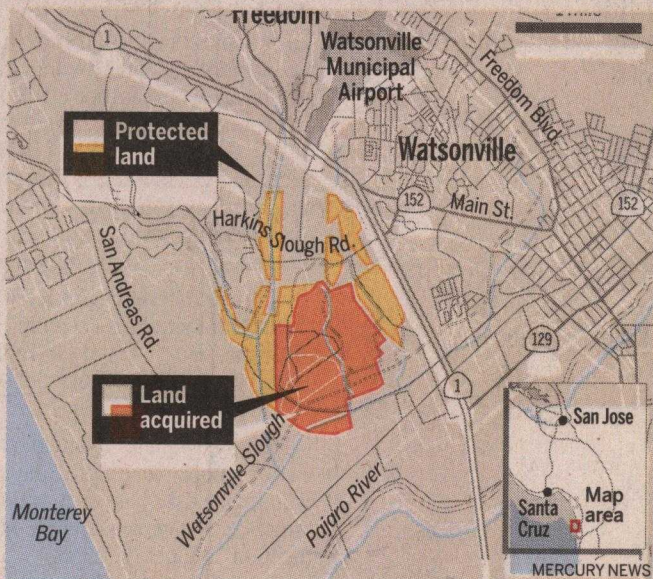
In an unusual twist, the



Under terms of the deal, farming on some of the most fertile land in California will be allowed to continue. Much of the produce grown on the land is organic.

farmers will pay to help restore and expand the property's wetlands. Corwin said unlike in many other such deals, the land trust will not resell or give the property to a government agency, but rather will continue to own it, and will collect the rent that the farmers have been paying to Tai.

After expenses, that money, about \$100,000 a year, will go to help expand the wetlands areas and to reduce soil erosion. The land remains on the tax rolls, farming can continue, and the wildlife restoration efforts receive a regular stream of money at a time when state and federal



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#### ONLINE EXTRA

For a video report on the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County's land deal, go to [www.mercurynews.com/video](http://www.mercurynews.com/video).



# WETLANDS | Land to be leased for farming

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funds for such restoration are declining, she said.

"It's a sustainable model that we're really excited about," Corwin said.

Jess Brown, executive director for the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, said he hopes the agreement can be a model for other deals.

"This is a great idea," he said. "It ensures that farming will continue and the sloughs will be restored. It's really a win-win situation. You need farming for the economic part of the valley, and it is important to keep the sloughs as pristine as possible."

The Pajaro River flows from southern Santa Clara County and San Benito County through Watsonville to the ocean, bypassing some of the richest farmland in California.

The river's name, which means "bird" in Spanish, dates back to 1769, when a Spanish expedition led by Capt. Gaspar de Portola wandered through the area from San Diego, en route to discovering San Francisco Bay, and stumbled upon a deserted Indian village where a bird with a six-foot wingspan was prominently displayed. Nobody knows exactly why the stuffed bird, which may have been a condor, was there. But the region bears the name "Pajaro Valley" to this day.

At that time, the valley contained six major freshwater slough systems that teemed with elk, grizzly bears and thick flocks of ducks and geese. As the town of Watsonville grew up, development and farming gradually filled in



PATRICK TEHAN - MERCURY NEWS

Terry Corwin, executive director of the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, left, and state wildlife biologist Jeannine DeWald at the property on Monday.

most of those wetlands, leaving only perhaps 30 percent today, by some estimates.

The property sits west of Highway 1 near Harkins Slough Road, just south of Pajaro Valley High School. Already, the state, federal government and county own about 449 acres of wetlands adjacent to the site of Monday's purchase. With the new deal, the total preserved area will reach about 935 acres, an area nearly the size of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco.

The plan is to gradually expand the size of the wetlands areas that flood in the winter, while leaving the farming, much of which is organic, on the hillsides.

"There's excellent potential for restoration in the areas that are inundated," said Jeannine DeWald, a biologist with the state Department of Fish and Game. "The seed bank is there. We might have to plant some willows and other plants, but it wants to

come back to wetlands." The property, which is actually four parcels, contains several endangered species, including the California red-legged frog. Other sensitive species, such as the burrowing owl, brown pelican, peregrine falcon and steelhead trout, are expected to benefit from the project, DeWald said.

Funding came from a variety of sources. The California Coastal Conservancy last week awarded the project \$6.5 million from Proposition 84, a state water bond approved by voters in 2006. The Nature Conservancy has committed \$1.5 million, and the state Wildlife Conservation Board is expected to grant \$5.5 million next week, also from state bond funding. The land trust is working to raise an additional \$500,000 in private donations, Corwin said.

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