

Slough acreage to be preserved

State agency approves grant for purchase

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The State Coastal Conservancy has approved a \$2.2 million grant for the acquisition of the Blohm Ranch, a 343-acre property in Elkhorn Slough that will now be preserved as a conservation area.

Meeting in Napa Friday, the board of directors of the state body awarded the funds to Nature Conservancy, a private, non-profit agency that will own, manage and re-vegetate the ranch, spread over the southern half of the wetland and in the upland reaches. Marc Del Piero, the Monterey County supervisor who represents its northern end, spoke in favor of awarding the grant.

In buying the property, the Nature Conservancy, which will put up \$1.2 million of the \$3.4 million for the project, brings implementation of the Elkhorn Slough Wetland Management Plan, approved nearly three years ago by the state agency, a major step closer to completion.

"They can't do anything for the property we don't approve of," said project manager Laurel Marcus. "In other words, it's for permanent preservation."

Marcus said the certified North Monterey County Local Coastal Plan designates the 65-acre marsh section of the ranch as a resource-conservation area and the 153 acres of upland native vegetation

as an environmentally sensitive habitat. Because the site contains 129 acres of steep strawberry fields planted in highly erodible acreage, it has been deemed a critical erosion area.

That land, in active crop production in the 1950s, has now been zoned for residential purposes, a move "supported by the agricultural community," Marcus said.

Previously, Monterey County turned down a subdivision application by the owner, who wanted to build homes on the site, because of soil-erosion concerns.

The Coastal Conservancy initially became involved with the slough after a 1985 grant was made to Monterey County for

preparation of an enhancement plan, a document addressing wide-ranging environmental problems on the slough and its watershed.

One of the largest coastal wetlands in the state, Elkhorn Slough encompasses coast salt marsh, tidal mud flats, open water and brackish marshes. Because of its position on the Pacific Flyway and the bountiful habitats it harbors, the slough is home to a significant concentration of migratory water fowl and shore birds, Marcus said.

In the five-year, re-vegetation program to be undertaken by the Nature Conservancy, the most erosion-prone fields that drain into the Blohm-Porter marsh will be re-vegetated. Maritime chaparral, a rare plant community hosting several species considered candidates for federal endangered status, is among the native vegetation flourishing on the ranch.

Marcus said the project will eventually allow public access on what rates as one of the most scenic properties on the slough.