

North-coast farmers confront new state park

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SANTA CRUZ — The coastal benchlands north of Santa Cruz are cool and windy — one of the best spots in the world to grow brussels sprouts. But the land is also incredibly scenic, and for the past 15 years, a huge chunk of it has been owned by the state Parks Department.

In the past, agriculture and visitors haven't been happy companions. Pesticides used on the fields can be hazardous to picnickers, and picnickers have been known to leave trash, break down gates, drive their cars over growing plants, tear down farm buildings for bonfires and pilfer vegetables from the fields.

But several north-coast farmers are working with state Parks on a unique plan to "coexist" with the beach visitors, who are expected to flock into the area when Wilder Ranch State Park opens in May.

Several north-coast ranchers and state parks officials discussed the future of the park Friday at a luncheon forum sponsored by COLAB, the Coalition of Labor, Agriculture and Business.

Although other state parks, such as Sunset State Beach and Palm Beach in Watsonville, are located next to operating farms, Wilder Ranch State Park is the only park where access to the beach will cut between the fields. In addition, a cliffside path will meander along the edges of other sprout fields.

Keeping a balance between agriculture and the public will be a challenge to both park rangers and the farm families who have ranches Wilder's fields for generations.

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At the turn of the century, Wilder Ranch was a thriving dairy ranch. But when pasteurization became required in the early '20s, the Wilder family decided the new equipment would be too costly, and instead cut their dairy herds and began leasing their fields to several Italian immigrant farmers.

Among the first to lease the fields were Pietro and Giulio Bargiacchi, Quinto Neri, Amerigo Presipe and Pietro Rinaldi.

Today, about 900 acres of prime oceanside farmland are still farmed by a handful of Italian-American families: the Bargiacchis, Morellis, Columbinis, Dellamoras and Rodonis, several of whom are related to the original farmers.

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Bill Rodoni, 18, and his brother Dan, 20, are the third generation of Rodonis to farm on Wilder Ranch. Their grandfather, Dante Rodoni, invented and patented a brussels sprout harvester which is still used today.

In the early '70s, the Wilder family considered selling the ranch to a Canadian development company that wanted to build a city of 10,000 homes there. But community uproar killed the project, and the Wilders ended up selling the land to the state in 1974.

State ownership has proved to be a mixed blessing to the farmers. On one hand, housing development is no longer a threat, and 90 percent

of the farmland has been reserved for agricultural use. State rangers also helped ease problems with trespassers and vandals.

On the other hand, dealing with layers of bureaucracy has been a heavy burden to men who for decades sealed their leases with a word and a handshake. And for years, the state would offer only one-year leases, which made any improvements on the land a big gamble for the farmers.

Improving a well, for instance, could cost a farmer up to \$30,000, with no guarantee that he would be able to use the well the following year.

Intervention by state Sen. Henry Mello helped extend the leases for

up to five years, but the leases run out next year, and there's no guarantee they will be renewed.

State parks representative Jim Fife acknowledged that the situation at Wilder Ranch is somewhat unique, but because the state's Coastal Act calls for preserving agriculture as well as local history, he feels coexistence is worth a try in this case.

While a portion of the park is slated to open in spring, plans for extensive trails and campgrounds may take 10 years to build, because of budget problems. Except for a handful of special events, the park has been officially closed to the public for the past 15 years.

In the meantime, the farmers are

trying to iron out some of the knotty problems of coexistence, such as reducing pesticide use to the lowest possible levels.

"There's a lot of study going on about the effects of pesticides and recreational use," said farmer Mac Morelli. "I'm meticulous about using them; we all are. We need to be, these are dangerous products that we use. But if we use them properly, we can be successful with this."

The farmers want coexistence to work, and they are optimistic it will work, Morelli said.

"The farmers, the parks people and the public are in favor of it, so why can't it work? Let's do it," he said.