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Visitors to the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County's parcel of 500 acres off Lee Road in Watsonville had a chance to hike the area Saturday. The Land Trust recently completed a 10-year, \$1.8 million management plan for the property.

'Valuable land for everybody'

Land Trust shows off farmland, habitat set for restoration

Agriculture

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WATSONVILLE — On about 500 acres at the heart of the Watsonville Slough system, fields of broccoli and strawberries sit next to fragile habitat for species such as the burrowing owl and the California red-legged frog.

To protect that habitat and hopefully improve the quality of crops, the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County recently completed a 10-year, \$1.8 million management plan for the property near Harkins Slough and Lee roads, which it owns.

Saturday morning under cloudy skies, Land Trust leaders showed off the land during a walking tour for about 40 of its members. Many participants got their first look at it.

"I've never seen the junction of farming



Some of the farmland recently purchased by the Land Trust in Watsonville will remain in production.

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and wetlands,” said Lynn Yoder, a Land Trust member from Soquel who joined the walk. “I’m so impressed with what the Land Trust is doing.”

The property includes about 200 acres of farmland, with the rest covered by marshes, grassland and slough.

The new management plan was developed with the two growers on the land — Reiter Berry Farm and Lakeside Organic Gardens — as well as biologists and other stakeholders. Organic strawberries and leafy greens are grown there, but changes in the fields’ configuration are planned to reduce erosion and water use.

About 25 acres of low-production value farmland will be phased out. Visitors on Saturday saw a broccoli field that is producing its last crop, for instance.

Yet a prime strawberry field on the property — with sandy soil and a south facing slope — will remain.

“We’re excited to achieve this balance between farming and a land management plan,” said Lynn Overtree, stewardship manager for the Land Trust.

An improved water system that includes new culverts also will help efficiency.

The second part of the project is expected to restore habitat, reduce erosion and promote wildlife.

Leaders plan to create pools for amphibians, such as the California red-legged frog. Grasslands also will be restored for species, such as burrowing owls.

The owls, which are rare in the state, have been spotted on the property in the winter, Overtree said. Leaders hope to see more in the future.

“We’re very excited about the grasslands,” said Bryan Largay, conservation director for the Land Trust.

Saturday, visitors near the slough peered through binoculars to spot birds including egrets, kingfishers and even a red-shouldered hawk.

Others said they had wanted to hike on the land and finally got the chance with the Land Trust’s invitation.

“It’s just such valuable land for everybody — for farming and wildlife,” said Henry Smith, a Pescadero farm manager and Land Trust member.

Money for the project will come from rental income that the Land Trust collects from the growers, Largay said, as well as likely funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

There is potential for public trails on the property, but it’s a sensitive area. Any trail plans would take a few years, Largay said.

“We need to make sure that the growers’ privacy and food safety is protected,” he said.