

Solid Ground

Land Conservation Models from California's Agricultural Heartland

A Great Valley Center Report

The Agricultural Transactions Program was created through a major investment by The David and Lucile Packard Foundation as part of their Conserving California Landscapes Initiative. Funded between 2000 and 2008, the program created strategic models for the conservation of important Central Valley agricultural lands.

The Great Valley Center, working in partnership with the University of California, Merced, supports activities and organizations that promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of California's Great Central Valley. Founded as a nonprofit corporation in 1997, it has become identified as a neutral convener and a resource for the region. The Center provides training, technical assistance and information through a wide array of programs and activities designed to help communities find solutions to challenges that will build toward a better future in the Central Valley.

Cover: A protected expanse of Merced County's Stevinson Ranch

Cover, left: Conservation results on Stanislaus County's Orvis Ranch

Cover, right: Grazing cattle coexisting with vernal pools on Furey Ranch

Opposite: A Merced County walnut from Ferrari's Humboldt Ranch

Opposite, small: Tomatoes from Yolo County

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHIL SCHERMEISTER



In the shade of a tall tree,
pause and reflect on what
we have grown.



A Strategic Investment

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation's \$5.75 million investment in Valley agricultural lands produced model transactions in three partnership communities and strengthened the conservation community throughout the region.

When the grant was made in 2000, the Valley's conservation climate was demonstrably different. The Central Valley, long defined by its globally important agricultural lands, was pressured by population growth. Development patterns threatened prime croplands, rangelands and critical habitat. And while the situation continues today, the outlook in 2000 was a bit more bleak. There were few staffed land trusts, and what minimal land conservation resources existed were used in an ad hoc fashion. Policy-makers lacked a clear mandate from constituents, and landowners needed viable alternatives to development. Without regionally appropriate and proven tools, conservation efforts fared poorly against powerful market forces.

The investment, an original piece of the Packard Foundation's Conserving California Landscapes Initiative, came at a critical time, and the Great Valley Center (GVC) spent a year convening potential partners and researching possibilities. The resulting strategy proposed in the Agricultural Transactions Program (ATP) was to create effective conservation models by funding transactions within three pilot communities, providing them with financial resources and technical expertise, and building the capacity of the region's conservation community.

GVC coordinated the effort over the next eight years, first designing a competitive selection process and convening critical partners and interested communities. Nine counties completed comprehensive requirements for the program, and three counties—Stanislaus, Merced, and Yolo—were selected as partnership communities. Each demonstrated a long-term commitment to the conservation of productive agricultural land and had proven its ability to leverage funds. The counties had active agricultural land trusts and a history of cooperation between county and city governments.

By 2008, the three partnership communities developed strategic land conservation plans and leveraged the \$4.5 million in transactional funds toward 20 completed transactions, conserving more than 21,800 acres. Each played a unique role in the strategic conservation of agricultural lands of local, state and national importance. Some transactions demonstrably shifted development patterns. Others reinforced the urban boundaries of encroaching communities. While most of the transactions reinforced public policy, others informed it. And all made the vital link between the working landscape, critical habitat lands and the Valley’s residents.

An equally important investment, the remainder of the ATP funds and all interest earned on the granted funds, was put to use strengthening the Valley’s conservation community by increasing the capacity of land trusts and local governments. ATP established an agricultural land conservation voice in local policy discussions and bolstered a Central Valley presence in statewide policy discussions. These funds were paired with additional grant funding that GVC made available in the region’s other counties through its LEGACI grant program (GVC’s signature regional funding effort in the areas of Land use, Economic development, Growth, Agriculture, Conservation, and Investment). Support for conservation efforts was catalyzed throughout the region.

Now eyes are on the future. Conservation dollars have been attracted into the Central Valley and generated from within it. Effective transactional models have been locally demonstrated. And with these tools, the Valley’s stewards—its land trusts and local governments, its farmers, ranchers and residents—will continue, acre by acre, to protect the Valley’s working landscapes for generations to come.

“The Great Valley Center provided expertise and financial resources that helped us create the Central Valley Farmland Trust. Its leadership is greatly enhancing the region.”

Bill Martin – Executive Director, Central Valley Farmland Trust

Agricultural Transactions Program (ATP) Goals

ATP provided Valley communities with a consistent funding source, a balanced approach, technical assistance, and a regional perspective to:

Permanently conserve significant agricultural lands

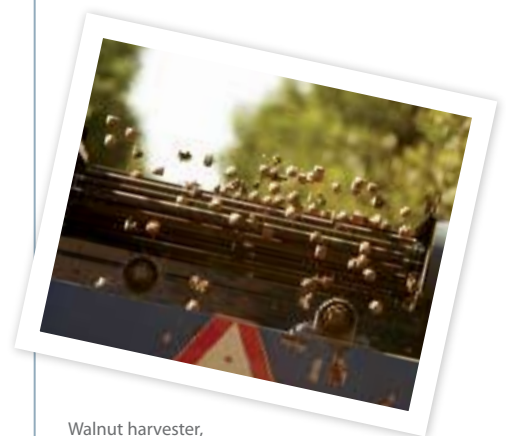
Influence growth patterns

Promote complementary public policies and programs supportive of conservation in the region

Act as a catalyst for local efforts

Strengthen the capacity of groups working to conserve agricultural land

Leverage resources with other sources of funding



Walnut harvester, Humboldt Ranch, Merced County

Opposite: Sunflower field on Pollock Ranch, Yolo County

Connecting a Conservation Corridor in Yolo County

An initial ATP investment in a strategically important habitat area established a conservation precedent soon followed by local landowners.

Two thirds of the nearly 7,000-acre Yolo Land & Cattle Co. ranch lay within the Blue Ridge-Berryessa Natural Area, an unbroken string of blue oak woodlands and ranch land in the Vaca Mountains. Sandwiched between the San Francisco Bay Area and the growing Sacramento Region, and under threat of ranchette and golf course development, the ranch is habitat to Tule elk, mountain lions, and bald and golden eagles.

“Owners of two additional ranches, totaling 6,500 acres, are currently working with local and statewide land trusts to permanently protect these valuable lands. We’re establishing a framework that encourages further protection and connectivity for large working landscapes and habitat corridors.”

Scott Stone – Owner, Yolo Land & Cattle Co.

A 2005 conservation easement on the property, held by the California Rangeland Trust, was the first in the area placed on a large cattle ranch. The seed money for the easement, provided by the Wildlife Conservation Board and ATP, enhanced interest and confidence among neighboring ranchers and led the way for the subsequent conservation of the 6,810-acre Bobcat Ranch immediately to the south. Both transactions reinforced Yolo County’s agricultural conservation policy.

A Yolo County landscape conserved by Yolo Land & Cattle Co.





Spring wildflowers
on Yolo Land & Cattle Co.



Scott Stone,
Yolo Land & Cattle Co.

Changing the regional discussion

Using the ATP grant to strategically engage local policymakers, agricultural leaders and landowners, the Great Valley Center elevated the land conservation discussion in meaningful ways and to lasting effect.

The investment had an immediate impact. By announcing the request for proposals, establishing selection criteria and making the transaction-related funds available, the grant prompted nine of the Central Valley's 19 counties to hold a mirror to their land use policies. That step alone generated supportive local policies where none had existed. On-the-record, county boards now committed to conserving agricultural lands.

The ATP publication, *Linked to the Land*, introduced landowners to transaction tools and the possibility of keeping lands in agricultural use. Another, *Winning the Development Lottery*, produced in collaboration with American Farmland Trust, provided landowners with regionally specific information on the multiple benefits of agricultural easements as an alternative to development. These two publications were distributed to more than 12,500 people, and along with early informational meetings held with landowners, seeded future transactions in partnership communities.

Getting some well-publicized easements in place reinforced local land use policies, and advocacy and education efforts garnered them even greater landowner and public support. The media attention they attracted throughout the partnership communities strengthened the region's connection to these working landscapes. By 2006, 42% of Central Valley Survey respondents identified the conversion of agricultural land as a big problem. That was an increase of 19 points over the results in 1999, the year before the program began.

EMERGING VOICES

The Central Valley Land Trust Council

To bring together the Valley's emerging land trusts in a regional discussion, GVC initiated (and is now paid to staff) the self-sustaining Central Valley Land Trust Council (CVLTC). With 22 member organizations, and three active committees engaging in policy, advocacy and educational issues at the regional and state levels, the Council works in close partnership with state land conservation leadership, primarily through the California Council of Land Trusts, an organization GVC helped to establish.

GVC staff currently serves on the agricultural working group of the California Council, and together, the regional and state organizations work to deliver trainings and disseminate information to the Valley's land trusts. Through the annual Land Trust Summit, the CVLTC will continue to provide the region's land conservation organizations with an avenue for building technical skills, organizational capacity and peer networks.

Right-sizing the Urban Service Area in Delhi

A growing constituency of conservation-minded landowners successfully minimized a proposed expansion of Delhi's urban service area.

Urban service areas create an expectation of future development, and conventional wisdom holds that service lines move in only one direction: out. However, with willing landowners and informed and strategic community leadership, this was disproved in the unincorporated Merced County town of Delhi, where the heightened awareness of conservation tools actually helped change a proposed policy.

"As Turlock and Delhi grow closer together, there will always be a buffer of at least 263 acres, likely to be covered in fruit and nut trees."

John Ferrari – Owner, Humboldt Ranch

ATP-supported landowner meetings and transaction closings helped generate strong interest among landowners at the same time the Delhi Municipal Advisory Committee proposed an expansion of the Specific Urban Development Plan (SUDP). Voiced interest in conservation transactions from landowners,

including one whose property was within the expanded SUDP, encouraged the Municipal Advisory Committee to redraw the boundary. To date, Delhi landowners have closed nine transactions, increasing the possibility that this land will continue in perpetuity to produce fruit and nuts as well as the sweet potatoes for which the area is known.

A walnut orchard on Merced County's Humboldt Ranch



The Central Valley Farmland Trust

valleyfarmland.org

With a LEGACI Grant, GVC funded a specialized land trust facilitator to work with fledgling organizations in Merced, Stanislaus and Sacramento counties. With this help, the groups became aware of their overlapping interests and compatible land conservation philosophies. Together, the group identified critical gaps in coverage, specifically across rapidly growing San Joaquin County, where every workday one of ten adults leave for employment in the Bay Area. (In fact, except for the county's lack of an active land trust at the time of their ATP application, it was an attractive candidate for selection as a partnership community.)

With Great Valley Center leadership, the three boards successfully came together as the four-county Central Valley Farmland Trust, reducing overhead and duplication of effort, improving organizational structure and outreach efforts and providing land trust coverage in San Joaquin County. The Trust, now with two full-time staff members, holds 18 agricultural conservation easements protecting nearly 11,000 acres, administers farmland mitigation ordinances for several municipalities and provides outreach and education across its four-county region.



- 1 A Municipal Advisory Committee proposal expanding Delhi's urban services line to Sycamore Street was met with resistance by local landowners interested in agricultural easements and the available ATP funding. As a result, the committee reconsidered its recommendation to the Merced County Board of Supervisors, restricting it to Palm Street.
- 2 Successful transactions can reinforce public policy, as in this area south of Delhi, where four easements strengthened both landowner expectation and public awareness of the accepted land use. These will support the urban line south of August Road.

Building local capacity

Successful conservation efforts benefit from the support of public and private resources, but without competent land trusts, nothing can happen.

To build local capacity and assist in land trust development, the Great Valley Center engaged with organizations at a variety of levels, functioning as a clearinghouse of conservation resources. Grants and contributions to ATP from the California Farmland Conservancy Program, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and the American Farmland Trust aided in the development of strategic land conservation plans, provided transactional assistance and funded initial appraisals. In Stanislaus County, ATP resources assisted with the first agricultural land conservation transaction to occur within its boundaries.

Meanwhile, an additional \$950,000 in LEGACI grants directly supported land conservation efforts. GVC staff provided important technical assistance, convening the region, facilitating transactions and sparking new collaborations such as the merger of three independent efforts into the four-county Central Valley Farmland Trust. As a result, there are now 23 staffed and active land trusts in the Central Valley.

Buffering the Grasslands Ecological Area

At Merced County's Stevinson Ranch, an ATP agricultural easement provided an important riparian ecosystem with a buffer against future development.

Stevinson Ranch is a 3,783-acre property at the confluence of the Merced and San Joaquin Rivers. Neighboring the Grasslands Ecological Area—California's largest contiguous wetlands complex—the property represented a strategic opportunity to buffer important riparian lands and restrict conversion from agriculture, while modeling complementary agricultural uses including seasonal and limited grazing on protected neighboring properties.

"We were pleased to see a partnership of this nature come together. Many folks worked long-hard hours to bring closure to this project. Benefits to agricultural resources, local economies and wildlife will be realized for generations to come."

John P. Donnelly – Executive Director, Wildlife Conservation Board

The easement, on 3,220 acres of the property, was a significant investment, well ahead of growing development pressures. It bridged the interests and efforts of agricultural interests, conservation efforts and small-scale resort development already existing in the area. The conserved land on the property will not only keep important soils in agricultural use, but the land will serve as a buffer between the wildlife areas and urban development.

Egrets of Merced County's Stevinson Ranch and the Grasslands Ecological Area



Valley oaks with cropland on Merced County's Stevinson Ranch

Breeding habitat on Stevinson Ranch for sensitive species such as Swainson's hawk and the loggerhead shrike



Leveraging resources

With a track record as a regional convener and the resources provided by ATP funding, the Great Valley Center brought interested parties together, provided models and connected local leaders with outside expertise. The resulting forward movement by Valley organizations and governments attracted additional resources, including a \$394,000 investment of planning and operational funds for the region's land trusts by the California Farmland Conservancy Program and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. In fact, each ATP dollar invested leveraged seven additional dollars, attracting a total of more than \$35,000,000 toward transactions from the California Farmland Conservancy Program, the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program, the Wildlife Conservation Board, and local mitigation fees.

EMERGING VOICES

The Mother Lode and Kern Kaweah Chapters of the Sierra Club

GVC staff participated in local conservation discussions, helping communities navigate this new territory from a neutral place and with an eye to improving both process and outcomes. Specific examples include the work performed with two Sierra Club chapters to create stronger mitigation programs in San Joaquin County, and later, Kern County.

Mitigation agreements resulting from this effort will bring more than \$80 million in fees to purchase and manage agricultural conservation easements in San Joaquin and Kern counties over the coming 20 years. Dedicated support to cover operational costs has been formalized within the mitigation language, and communities have strengthened their conservation muscles in the process. Now, farmland mitigation ordinances are in place in San Joaquin County and in the City of Stockton, with elevated dialogue occurring in numerous locations throughout the Valley.

Lessons Learned

Lessons learned in the pursuit of far-reaching goals inform future work in the field. Toward strengthening the conservation community across the state and country, the Agricultural Transactions Program offers three lessons from the effort.

Technical support returns important benefits

With a capable and connected conservation community in place, mandated mitigation can become a successful conservation effort. Prior to the ATP investment, much of the capacity needed to take advantage of these opportunities did not exist in the Valley. Policies weren't in place, and there were few trusts holding agricultural easements. Opportunities were lost. Technical support for early transactions was a critical component of the grant.

"Our work with the Great Valley Center got the Central Valley Farmland Trust up and running. Now, several cities and San Joaquin County have adopted agricultural mitigation programs that will result in more than \$100 million in mitigation fees over the next 20-30 years."

Eric Parfrey – Mother Lode Chapter, Sierra Club

Through technical support from ATP staff, Stanislaus County's land trust established a local precedent in 2005, generating \$400,000 in mitigation funds. The City of Brentwood collected \$7 million as a result of the creation of an agricultural land protection strategy supported by a LEGACI grant. And the Plainfield easement in Yolo County, which had originally been approved for ATP support, became completely funded by mitigation funds in the amount of \$510,000.

Holding transactions carries a cost

Grant funds and mitigation dollars are often hindered by the well-intentioned language guiding transactions. One frequent stipulation directs funding solely into transactions, yet each deal also carries a cost for its champion and holder. Those costs should be acknowledged and allowed within terms of mitigation. Otherwise, the funds are at risk of being idly banked while nonprofit land trusts scramble to cover potential costs. Land prices continue to rise; deals don't get done.

Technical assistance to the Kern-Kaweah and Mother Lode Chapters of the Sierra Club established an allowance for operational funds. Written into mitigation language, this self-sustaining model has been replicated by other communities and incorporated procedurally by other land trusts in the region.

A flowering portion of the 600-foot native-plant hedgerow connecting the Merced River to wetlands habitat developed and conserved on Magneson Farm



Building capacity is essential

The Agricultural Transactions Program was an ambitious undertaking; it was the right move at the right time. However, early projections underestimated the need for experienced, staffed, and active land trusts on the ground. And the land trusts were just the beginning. Each area of the region also needed knowledgeable real estate professionals in order to make transactions work.

Two years into the grant, ATP staff realized the need to step back and focus a greater level of resources on the basics. Restructuring the program allowed GVC to provide training and informational resources for real estate professionals, appraisers and land trust staff and boards, both within the partnership communities and throughout the Valley. The revised program undertook the challenge of building a critical mass of organizations capable of successfully employing the transaction funds.

Moving the Region Forward

The Agricultural Transactions Program created new models for agricultural land conservation within its three Central Valley partnership communities. It set a precedent for the region, demonstrating to community leaders, landowners and conservation funders that with adequate resources and a strategic approach, urban boundaries can be reinforced; development patterns can even be altered. This was a fundamental shift in thought. By presenting Central Valley communities with this new possibility and the resources with which to act, the investment strengthened the region's ability to conserve important agricultural lands and define their role in its future.

Blue oaks along a stream on Yolo County's Bobcat Ranch



Outcomes

Measured in acres protected and by indicators of conservation capacity, growth in the Central Valley's commitment and ability to protect important agricultural lands is already clear.

Impacts at a Glance	1999	2008
Acres protected by Central Valley Land Trusts	22,338	99,313
Land Trusts:		
Working in the Central Valley	17	23
Working on Agricultural Land Conservation	13	17
Working in Multiple Counties	7	10
Land Trust Staff	36	90
Strategic Land Conservation Plans	2	10
Valley Counties Represented by Land Trusts	19	23
Central Valley Land Trusts participating in the National Accreditation Program	–	3
Statewide/Regional Land Conservation Coalitions	–	2
National Conservation Organizations with a Central Valley Program	2	4
Regional Convening/Training and Workshops held since 1999	–	15

Bee pollinating an almond blossom on Merced County's Beach Farm





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The Great Valley Center is a nonprofit organization working in partnership with the University of California, Merced to improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of California's Great Central Valley.

