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Conservation of Acorn Ridge Preserve Adds 111 Acres to Support Santa Cruz Long-toed Salamander Recovery Plan

With the recent acquisition of Acorn Ridge Preserve, the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County adds 111 acres of wildlife habitat to support the recovery of the state-listed and federally endangered Santa Cruz long-toed salamander (SCLTS).

This new acquisition, in combination with 162 acres already protected by the Land Trust, has significant implications for the SCLTS and other resident and migratory wildlife threatened by habitat fragmentation along the Highway 1 corridor in the La Selva Uplands. The organization aims to protect 350 acres of habitat and collaborate in the construction of a crossing spanning Highway 1.

Acorn Ridge Preserve has been a high priority for conservationists for at least a decade, but an agreement with the landowner wasn't struck until the Land Trust stepped in. With its close ties in the community, the Land Trust was able to reach a mutually agreeable arrangement with the landowner.

Real estate transactions like these are complicated and each one is different. In this case, the Land Trust applied for a grant from the [Wildlife Conservation Board](#) (WCB) to fund the purchase. While waiting for approval, they performed all due diligence related to the property, paving the way for a streamlined escrow process. Gratefully, WCB approved the grant, funding the full purchase and enabling the Land Trust to protect Acorn Ridge Preserve from development in perpetuity. Eventually, the title will be transferred to the [California Department of Fish and Wildlife](#) (CDFW) to incorporate into the Watsonville Slough Ecological Reserve for long-term management.

"Over the years, this stunning area and critical habitat has been eyed by developers for everything from a golf course to luxury



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homes,” said Sarah Newkirk, Executive Director for the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County. “Maintaining it in its natural state is a better outcome for the environment, wildlife, and community overall.”

“The Wildlife Conservation Board is proud to support the permanent protection of this ecologically rich landscape, which includes oak woodlands and habitat for sensitive species like the Santa Cruz long-toed salamander,” said Jennifer Norris, executive director of the Wildlife Conservation Board. “Conserving places like this strengthens habitat connectivity, safeguards biodiversity, and helps advance [California’s 30x30 goals](#).”

A critical habitat for native and migrating species

The SCLTS exists only in an approximately 50-square mile area of coastal habitat in southern Santa Cruz and northern Monterey Counties, preferring to inhabit areas with coastal scrub, maritime chaparral, woodlands, and forests.

The species breeds in ponds and lives most of its life underground in small animal burrows. Acorn Ridge Preserve is less than one-half mile from a breeding pond on the Watsonville Slough Ecological Reserve, which has confirmed breeding activity.

This acquisition supports connectivity of upland and dispersal habitat between several SCLTS metapopulations and will contribute significant acreage to the existing contiguous area of undisturbed and unfragmented high-quality habitat at the Watsonville Slough Ecological Reserve (Buena Vista Unit) located immediately to the east of the subject property. The project will also provide protection of other wildlife that utilize and live in oak woodland habitat.

“The Department of Fish and Wildlife appreciates the partnership with the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County. With this 111-acre expansion of the Watsonville Slough Ecological Reserve, a rare large contiguous tract totaling 402 acres is now conserved on the landscape,” Terris Kasteen, CDFW Environmental Scientist.

About the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County

The mission of the [Land Trust of Santa Cruz County](#) is to protect, care for, and connect all people to the vibrant natural and working lands that are essential for our community and nature to thrive together for generations to come.