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LAND TRUST

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Land Trust to Open Waddle Ranch for Public Recreation

MARTIS VALLEY — What was described as the most expensive deal in history to preserve sensitive Sierra land was announced Thursday by conservationists.

Owners of the 1,462-acre **Waddle Ranch** south of Truckee were paid \$23.5 million to transfer the land to the Truckee Donner Land Trust, which immediately opened the property for public recreation.

The deal was described as a "conservation grand slam" that could in turn build momentum for similar deals to preserve Sierra land under ever-increasing pressure to develop.

"This is a launching pad," said David Sutton, Northern California and Nevada director of the Trust for Public Land that had a significant role in the transaction.

Sutton lauded the deal — nearly three years in the making — as a "conservation victory virtually unprecedented in the Sierra."

Sutton said no other conservation deal in the Sierra has involved as much money. Several groups — public and private — raised money for the transaction.

A historic cattle grazing **ranch**, the **Waddle** property has been owned by the Chicago-based Pritzker family — owners of the Hyatt hotel chain — for more than 30 years, said Perry Norris, executive director of the Truckee Donner Land Trust. The property, a mix of pasture, pine-studded hillsides and a scenic alpine lake, has been eyed over the years as the potential location of a golf course and 600-home subdivision, Norris said.

Other parts of the Martis Valley near **Waddle Ranch** are growing quickly, with more than 2,400 new homes or condominiums already approved at nearby Martis Camp, Timilick and Northstar, Norris said.

Forever protected

Now the forested landscape will be forever protected as habitat for deer, eagles, coyote, bears, mountain lions and bobcats, Norris said. Dry Lake — which despite its name contains appreciable amounts of water — will continue as an important migratory stop for waterfowl.

"It's arguably the most biologically rich area in the Martis Valley," Norris said.

A 'No Trespassing' sign posted on an entrance gate to the property for 50 years was removed to start Thursday's celebration.

It was replaced with a sign welcoming the public to enjoy the place for non-

motorized recreation. The trust is currently developing a recreation plan for the land.

"We'll be out here," said Mary Alice Thauvette, a Soda Springs resident who attended Thursday's celebration. "It's a beautiful place. It's really exciting to have this property open to the public and to know it will never be developed."

Another deal?

The **Waddle Ranch** abuts more open space to the west — 2,200 acres surrounding Martis Creek Lake owned by the federal government. Conservationists hope to reach a deal with Sierra Pacific Industries for an easement to 6,500 to 7,000 acres southeast of **Waddle Ranch** — a transaction that would establish a huge swath of open land linking Martis Creek Lake to the Mount Rose Wilderness.

"We think this will be the foundation for a lot of important work," Sutton said. "I think right now we have the opportunity to do things on a scale that even a few years ago we wouldn't have thought possible."

With upscale development sweeping across the Sierra — particularly north of Lake Tahoe, where the land has a checkerboard pattern of private and public ownership — conservation is increasingly critical, Sutton said.

"People are realizing this isn't going to stay the same if we don't do something about it," Sutton said. "It's now or never."

Participants in **Waddle Ranch** deal

- Truckee Donner Land Trust
- Trust for Public Land
- California Resources Agency
- California Wildlife Conservation Board
- Placer County
- Truckee Tahoe Airport District.
- Pritzker Realty Group.
- Sierra Watch.
- Mountain Area Preservation Fund.
- Sierra Business Council.