

Keeping Sierra lands wild

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Monday, February 2, 2009



(02-02) 04:00 PST Sierraville, Sierra County --

The valley known as Perazzo Meadows is a stunning landscape of woods and watershed habitat surrounded by glimmering Sierra Nevada peaks, but there is more to the high-country Shangri-La than sheer beauty.

The 982-acre meadow northwest of Truckee is an integral piece of an unusual land grant made almost 150 years ago that left pristine forests, rivers and valuable wildlife habitat in the northern Sierra in a checkerboard pattern of alternating public and private ownership.

Bisected by a meandering section of the Little Truckee River, the remote, snow-covered meadow was in imminent danger of being sold to developers or parceled out for vacation homes until a conservation coalition purchased it and two other private properties from Siller Brothers Inc. for \$6 million.

The Dec. 30 deal is the first major success of the Northern Sierra Partnership, formed in 2007 as part of an unprecedented campaign to take out of private hands 65,000 acres of land over the next three to five years through a combination of purchases, conservation easements and management agreements.

The \$130 million effort is part of a broader plan, started in 1991 by the Trust for Public Land of San Francisco, to permanently protect as much as 200,000 acres of private checkerboard property in the region, which stretches from South Lake Tahoe to Lassen Volcanic National Park.

"Protecting these High Sierra meadows with creeks running through them are huge priorities," said David Sutton, the Northern California and Nevada director for the Trust for Public Land. "Perazzo has been a major priority for us since the mid-1990s. Buying it means 2 1/2 miles of the lower Truckee River are protected and the threat of land conversion is ended."

The Trust for Public Land formed the partnership with the Truckee Donner Land Trust, the Nature Conservancy, the Sierra Business Council and the Feather River Land Trust in an effort to save the Sierra's most unspoiled forest and wildlife habitat.

The alternating one-square-mile parcels known as the Sierra checkerboard cover a total of 1.5 million

acres - an area roughly 80 miles long and 40 miles wide. On maps, it looks like a checkerboard.

The board-game pattern is the result of an 1862 scheme by the federal government to extend the Transcontinental Railroad over Donner Summit, the infamous site of the cannibalistic travails of the Donner Party 15 years earlier. The Central Pacific Railroad Co. was granted every other square mile of property along the mountainous route as an incentive to build the tracks.

The idea was to allow for enough room for the railroad to meander through the mountains. It also supplied the railroad with property in virtually every location where future towns might pop up, a strong inducement given the money-making possibilities.

Parcels not used were sold to timber and mining companies to help fund construction and, over time, it was all sold. About 40 percent of the railroad land was eventually acquired by Sierra Pacific Industries, a logging company based in Redding that is now the largest private land owner in California. Most of the public squares have since become National Forest lands.

Over the past two decades, the Trust for Public Land has negotiated the acquisition of about 25,000 acres of former railroad property. But Sierra Pacific and other lumber companies, along with ranchers and private investment management companies, still hold some of the most spectacular parcels.

Pressure to sell

With the economic downturn, the private owners have been under increasing pressure to unload their property. It is an opportunity for conservationists, who face the daunting prospect of trying to outbid resort developers and wealthy people looking to build second homes.

Sutton said piecemeal development of the land would destroy forest ecosystems and cut off wildlife corridors by inserting roads and introducing exotic species and domestic animals. Such development in wildland areas also makes firefighting more difficult and prevents consistent forest management planning.

Studies predict that climate change will shrink snowpack in the Sierra, which produces 60 percent of California's water supply, by 36 percent in the next 50 to 100 years. Sutton said the High Sierra forest must be protected for native wildlife to survive, which is why it was so important for the conservation groups to join forces.

"The loss of forest systems are exacerbating the increased temperatures because it means less trees that absorb carbon," Sutton said. "You lose the productivity of the forest with low-density development, and because of increasing temperatures, wildlife is going to have to move to survive. So if you can create solid blocks of land, you are affording those species room to move."

The partnership plans to use foundation grants, state bond money, private donations and philanthropic contributions to protect 40 percent of the approximately 500,000 acres of private lands in the

checkerboard, including important watersheds and wildlife corridors.

The idea is to create a conifer zone to the crest of the Sierra and protect watersheds on nine major forks of the American, Yuba, Bear and Little Truckee river systems.

Perazzo Meadows is home to numerous rare species, including willow flycatchers, peregrine falcons, bald and golden eagles and the mountain yellow-legged frog. Native Lahontan cutthroat trout have disappeared from the tributary that meanders through the large, wet valley, but the Truckee River Watershed Council is hoping state Fish and Game officials will agree to reintroduce the threatened fish as part of a major restoration project.

A 400-acre parcel northwest of Castle Peak at the edge of the Paradise Valley was also acquired from Siller. A third property near Collins Lake, in Yuba County, was part of the deal, but it is not part of the checkerboard. It will eventually be transferred to the state Department of Fish and Game.

The Perazzo and Paradise properties will be turned over to the Tahoe National Forest. They are the ninth and 10th squares to be acquired near Castle Peak since the Trust for Public Land began buying property 18 years ago. Four other parcels are still under negotiation, but Perazzo is the most valuable, Sutton said, because it includes high-mountain meadow habitat, a river and wetlands.

Wilderness hopes, fears

The partnership is lobbying Congress to create a Castle Peak wilderness area, which would cover a portion of the Perazzo property. Such a prospect scares some local residents, whose snowmobile tracks can often be seen zig-zagging in the winter between frost-tinged willow trees and across the blanket of snow covering the meadow.

"A lot of people access their property on snowmobiles and might have to pass through the wilderness area, which prohibits snowmobiles," said Ken Bretthauer, a longtime resident who manages a local ranch and campground. "Locals are afraid that access to this area that they have used for years is going to be cut off."

Perry Norris, executive director of the Truckee Donner Land Trust, said the proposed wilderness would not prohibit snowmobiling where it is now popular. He said public access and recreational opportunities will be enhanced - a far cry, he said, from what would have happened if developers had purchased the property.

"With Tahoe basically built out, the development pressure was going to mount in the alpine areas," Norris said. "That is why this acquisition is so critical."

Sutton hopes the purchase is the first of many successes in the group's effort to save the forests and river systems of the Sierra Nevada range.

"The opportunity is greater than it has ever been to have an impact of historic proportions," Sutton said. "If we are going to find a way to keep the American West the way we would like to, this is the kind of solution that we've got to come up with."

Sierra land grants

View a 1924 map of the Sierra checkerboard lands at links.sfgate.com/ZFYH.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/02/02/MN9015FKLA.DTL>

This article appeared on page **A - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

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Keeping Sierra lands wild
Filling in the gaps (Chronicle Graphic)

Filling in the gaps

The pattern of alternating public and private one-acre parcels looks like a checkerboard on this map, with the white squares representing private property. The goal of the Northern Sierra Partnership over the next decade is to buy or obtain conservation easements over 100,000 acres of private property that are most threatened by development. The strategy is to protect, and in some cases create, jobs in local Sierra communities while fighting climate change. Sustainable farming, ranching, logging and forest management would all conceivably be allowed.

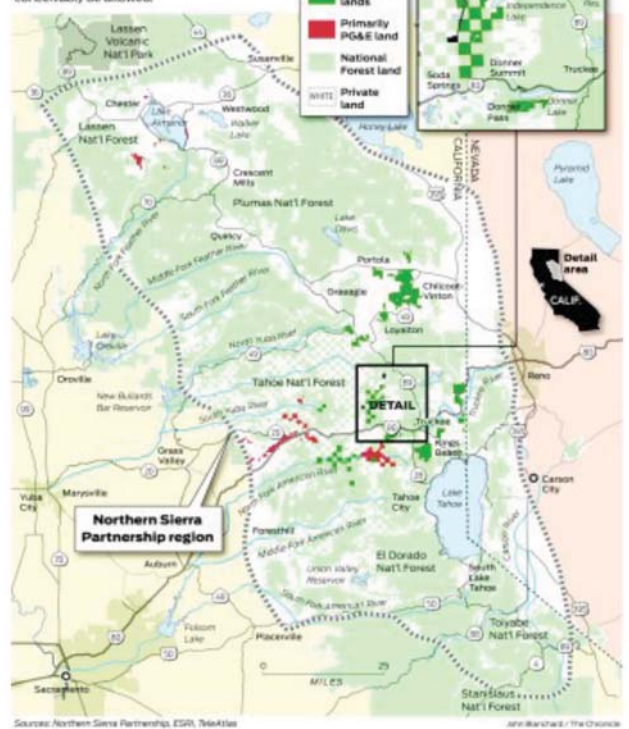


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Perry Norris of the Truckee Donner Land Trust (left) and David Sutton of the Trust for Public Land, in Sierraville. (Kurt Rogers / The Chronicle)



Kurt Rogers / The Chronicle



Sources: Northern Sierra Partnerships, ESRI, TeleAtlas

John Marchand / The Chronicle

Keeping Sierra lands wild

This composite photograph, compiled from five images, shows the 982-acre Perazzo Meadows embraced by Sierra Nevada peaks northwest of Truckee. (Kurt Rogers / The Chronicle)



Kurt Rogers / The Chronicle