

[back to article](#)

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\$36 million deal will preserve Jenner land

Six agencies buying 5,630-acre coastal headlands property in record conservation purchase

By BLEYS W. ROSE
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The Jenner Headlands, a stunning swath of undulating coastal prairie and inland forest that almost soars off the sands of Sonoma Coast State Beach, is being bought for \$36 million, the largest conservation acquisition in Sonoma County history.

If the transaction, forged through a partnership of public agencies and environmental nonprofits, is completed on schedule early next year, public access would be conducted through organized tours sometime next spring.

The 5,630-acre headlands, now reachable only by private logging roads from Jenner or Duncans Mills, also would host a three-mile section of the California Coastal Trail.

The expanse of grass and woodlands is believed to rank among the largest privately held properties along the California coast.

"You could be looking at 40 homes or a golf course right now," west county Supervisor Mike Reilly said Thursday as he surveyed the property from boulders clustered around a wind-bowed oak tree. "Now, we have preserved one of the most dramatic views in California."

On a clear day, a vantage point on the Jenner Headlands provides a view of the Russian River's spillway into the ocean, Bodega Head and the Point Reyes Peninsula.

Under the pending transaction, the county's Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District would contribute about a third of the \$36 million purchase price, while the rest would be split among the Sonoma Land Trust, the state Coastal Conservancy, the



MARK ARONOFF / PD

The Sonoma Land Trust toured its new acquisition, the 5,630-acre Jenner Headlands purchased for \$36 million, thursday October 9, which includes this vista looking south including Goat Rock, Bodega Head and Pt. Reyes and Highway 1. The property, north of Jenner where the Russian River enters the Pacific Ocean, extends 2.5 miles north along Highway 1 and inland toward Cazadero.

California Conservation Board, the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's coastal and estuarian land protection program.

Ralph Benson, the Sonoma Land Trust's executive director, said his agency would take title to the land and would be responsible for managing public access to it.

Sonoma Land Trust already owns about 20,000 acres, including the 5,000-acre Baylands area in southern Sonoma County that once had been eyed for a casino.

"This is an opportunity we cannot pass up," Benson said as he, Reilly and officials representing agencies involved in the transaction strolled the headlands on the windy afternoon.

"Ultimately, we'd like to turn it over to the state parks system, but given the economy and the state budget, the timing isn't right for anything other than securing it for future generations," Benson said.

The Land Trust will launch a fund-raising campaign to raise its share, estimated to be about \$8 million, he said.

Negotiations on the purchase date back about four years, a relatively short time compared with the usual course of transactions involving land conservation.

Reilly said the primary owner, New Orleans surgeon Dr. Ollie Edmunds, approached him several years ago about development potential of the hills above Jenner.

Edmunds was unavailable for comment Thursday, but his representative, Henry Alden, said Edmunds eventually concluded the land, which already was subdivided into about 40 plots, was better off in public trust.

Alden said some of the forest of Douglas fir and redwood trees had been logged within the past decade, but other portions hadn't been felled since the late 1800s.

"It was time to place it in the hands of the broader public," Alden said. "And to keep it in a condition that we can all enjoy."

The transaction needs official approval from several agencies as well as the Board of Supervisors, which governs the Open Space District.

Andrea Mackenzie, district general manager, said her agency had taken the lead role in financial arrangements, using money from the county's quarter-cent sales tax as leverage to secure funding commitments from other entities.

"This shows we can effectively leverage Sonoma County residents' broad support for open space protection and the sales tax to bring in additional funding that will increase protections for our county's coastline," Mackenzie said.

You can reach Staff Writer Bleys W. Rose at 521-5431 or bleys.rose@pressdemocrat.com.

