

McClintock, Boxer team up to propose Coloma ranch as national historic site

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By Rob Hotakainen

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WASHINGTON – Calling it another "Plymouth Rock," Republican Rep. Tom McClintock is proposing that the Department of Interior take over a 271-acre ranch near Coloma as a national historic site.

Normally, McClintock is no fan of expanding government, but he's making an exception for the project in his 4th Congressional District.

McClintock has an unlikely ally in his endeavor, Democrat Barbara Boxer, who has introduced a similar bill in the Senate.

Under their plan, the federal government would use private money – including \$1 million from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy – to buy the Gold Hill Ranch in western El Dorado County. It would be preserved as a national site of historical and cultural value, and ultimately could be developed into a public park.

The project is gaining attention because of the political odd couple that's promoting it on Capitol Hill.

McClintock, one of the House's most conservative members and no fan of earmarks that benefit his district, and Boxer, one of the most liberal senators, do not have a history of working together on legislation.

"To our knowledge, this is the one and only," said Alan Ehrgott, executive director of the American River Conservancy. "It has been suggested that this is akin to the Immaculate Conception."

Backers of the project say it has international value because the ranch was home to the former Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony, recognized as the first Japanese settlement in the United States. And it includes the grave site of Okei Ito, the first Japanese person to die on American soil, at age 19.

"I've always supported preserving the history of our nation," McClintock said in an interview. "In this case, it's the Plymouth Rock for every American of Japanese ancestry."

McClintock, who introduced the bill last year and reintroduced it two weeks ago, said the legislation would not appropriate any additional federal money for the project. Instead, he said, it would authorize the acquisition of the property out of the Interior Department's existing budget.

The project has plenty of enthusiastic backers, including Tim Johnson, president and CEO of the California Rice Commission, which has donated \$10,000 toward the project.

"You think about all the immigrants that came to the United States from all over Europe, but we don't talk an awful lot about the immigrants that came from Asia," he said.

Boxer said the land would be acquired and managed by the Interior Department's Bureau of Land Management (BLM). She called it "an important part of California history," and said it should be preserved for future generations.

The Wakamatsu Colony was founded in 1869 by 20 Japanese immigrants who formed a tea and silk plantation.

The immigrants, who arrived in San Francisco and then traveled through Sacramento on their way to Gold Hill, brought with them silkworm cocoons, tea plants, bamboo shoots and mulberry trees, which were planted and remain on the site.

The colony operated for only two years before it was sold to the Francis Veerkamp family. Three descendants – siblings Gary, Philip and Evelyn Veerkamp – have a contract to sell the property to the American River Conservancy, a local land trust that has been raising money for the project.

"Lots of family memories are attached," said Evelyn Veerkamp, of Placerville. "One doesn't let go easily, but on the other hand it's great that it will be preserved, and for that we are very, very grateful."

Ehrgott said the American River Conservancy hopes to finalize the sale by Oct. 29. It already has raised \$2 million toward the purchase price. Ehrgott said the group will try to get a loan to get additional money if the federal government does not act before the sale closes.

In their analysis of the project, BLM officials said the projected \$3.29 million cost appears reasonable but the government would come up with a "fair-market valuation" before proceeding.

Officials noted that the site has added value not only because of its ties to Japan but because it's part of "the historic California Gold Rush landscape that is urbanizing rapidly."

Sacramento Democratic Rep. Doris Matsui, who's co-sponsoring McClintock's bill, called the site "a unique piece of our nation's past." It has already been designated as a state historical site and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

"The men and women that started the colony led the way to further development of California's agricultural economy and our state's rich cultural heritage," Matsui said.

The project has not aroused any opposition on Capitol Hill, but some are questioning the price tag of \$3.29 million to acquire the land.

"In any of these deals, you have to look very closely at them, to see who's benefiting, who owns the land, and are they getting a better deal than they would have otherwise," said Steve Ellis, vice president of the Washington-based watchdog group Taxpayers for Common Sense.

The group has not taken an official position on the project. But Ellis, noting the cost of roughly \$12,000 per acre, said: "That's pretty valuable land ... Obviously, there's something more to the land."

After owning the ranch for more than a century, the Veerkamp family is well known in the area. Doug Veerkamp, a prominent contractor, is a second cousin to the owners of the property. He has given thousands of dollars in campaign contributions to McClintock and his predecessor, former Republican Rep. John Doolittle. Ehrgott said Doug Veerkamp is not a party to the transaction.