

5. Narrative Description

5a. Detailed Project Description

Project Description

Purpose

Feather River Land Trust (FRLT) requests \$97,750 to help purchase a conservation easement over the 142-acre Chadwick Ranch, located immediately adjacent to Loyalton Elementary and High Schools in Sierra County. The conservation easement would protect a working ranch, wildlife habitat, and scenic open space, as well as guarantee permanent educational access to this land.

The property contains 142 acres of irrigated pasture, wetlands, and exceptional cottonwood-willow riparian habitat, and includes three branches of Smithneck Creek, a major tributary to the Middle Fork Feather River.

The conservation easement will conserve a working ranch landscape. The landowner currently leases the property for cattle grazing and haying (three cuttings per year), and will continue to do so under the easement. The lessee, Einen Grandi, is a multi-generational Sierra Valley rancher, and the landowner, Anne Chadwick, intends to sell him the property immediately after the easement closes. Mr. Grandi has been playing a major role in the easement negotiations in anticipation of his future ownership. A conservation easement on the property will conserve the property's agricultural values and keep it in agricultural use for generations to come. If the easement can be completed, FRLT will obtain the right to install cattle fencing to protect the property's sensitive riparian areas and will likely partner with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the landowner to do so.

The Chadwick Ranch is centered in Sierra Valley, which is designated by the National Audubon Society as a Nationally-Important Bird Area and an important stopover in the Pacific Flyway. Three branches of Smithneck Creek run through the property and sustain exceptional cottonwood-willow habitat. The Chadwick Ranch is home to rainbow trout, American dippers, diverse songbirds including yellow warblers and Bullock's orioles, many raptor species, including barn owl, bald and golden eagle, prairie falcon, northern harrier, ferruginous hawk, rough-legged hawk, and a host of other unique wildlife species. It also provides migratory and winter habitat for the Truckee-Loyalton Mule Deer Herd.

In addition to conserving 142 acres of scenic open space, wetland, riparian, and riverine habitat, and working agricultural lands, the Chadwick Ranch is located across the street from Loyalton Elementary and High Schools and will provide an ideal outdoor classroom for Loyalton children of all ages. Loyalton High School has an award-winning agriculture program (the last remaining program in Plumas and Sierra Counties), and staff and students are eager to implement agriculture education projects on the property if it can

be conserved. FRLT's school-based K-12 Learning Landscapes education program will highlight agriculture and local food production as well as stream restoration and ecology. Teachers and students will be trained and supported to plan and implement hands-on stewardship and restoration projects on the property including invasive weeds management, restoration of native plants, wildlife viewing and habitat enhancement.

Presently, the 340 students in Loyalton schools do not have access to an outdoor classroom – the only community in our region for which we have not secured access to a Learning Landscape. Because it is located immediately adjacent to Loyalton schools, and because of its agricultural and ecological values, several K-12 teachers have expressed strong interest in using this specific property. By purchasing the conservation easement, this economically disadvantaged community would have an outdoor space that would become an important educational hub for all kids and families in the area.

The Chadwick Ranch Conservation Easement will conserve multi-generational agricultural use, protect high quality wetlands and cottonwood-willow riparian habitats, and provide an exceptional outdoor classroom to the children of Loyalton. The Northern Sierra Partnership has committed \$65,000 in capital toward the \$150,000 easement (estimated value), as well as \$30,000 toward staff, legal, baseline, and other pre-acquisition costs needed to complete the easement. A \$25,000 stewardship fund and a \$5,000 legal defense fund, both donated by landowner Anne Chadwick, will be established at closing. FRLT requests \$97,750 to complete the conservation easement (\$85,000 towards capital and \$12,750 in administrative costs).

Specifically, completion of the proposed conservation easement with FRLT would result in the following deliverables and meet these specific goals:

- ✓ **The Conservation Easement:** The primary deliverable of this transaction, the recorded conservation easement, funded in large part by the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, would directly and in perpetuity, eliminate the short and long-term threat of subdivision and subsequent development of the Chadwick Ranch. The proposed easement will protect and enhance wetlands on the property, allow for continued management of the property as a working ranch, and enable and protect educational access for Loyalton public schools in perpetuity
- ✓ **Preservation of Ranches, Agricultural Lands, Working Landscapes, and the Local Agricultural Economy:** Protection of this working ranch in the Sierra Nevada Region is consistent with the mission of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. Protecting Chadwick Ranch will help ensure that it can continue contributing to the local agricultural economy as a working beef ranch and haying operation. Furthermore, it will enable land-based agricultural education and stewardship for Loyalton High School's award winning ag education program, the last remaining program in the region.

- ✓ **Greater Protection of Sierra Valley, and its Land, Water Quality, and Other Resources from the Threat of Future Subdivision:** The Chadwick Ranch is centered in Sierra Valley, which is designated by the National Audubon Society as a Nationally-Important Bird Area and an important stopover in the Pacific Flyway. Sierra Valley has been identified as a top priority conservation area by the Northern Sierra Partnership and within The Nature Conservancy's Sierra Nevada Ecoregional Plan. The Chadwick Ranch Conservation Easement will conserve 142 acres of irrigated pasture, wetlands, and exceptional cottonwood-willow riparian habitat, and includes 1.25 miles of perennial streams within three branches of Smithneck Creek, a major tributary to the Middle Fork Feather River. Not only will the Chadwick easement prevent these habitats and waterways from being residentially developed, it will preclude mining, road building, feed lots, overgrazing, industrial development, and other uses that would potentially have a severe negative impact on water quality. These restrictions, coupled with FRLT's affirmative right to construct riparian fencing, will also protect exceptional fish and wildlife habitat for a diverse assemblage of species.
- ✓ **Increased Opportunities for Tourism, Recreation, and Public and Student Educational Access:** As part of FRLT's ongoing "Learning Landscapes" program, the easement would require that the property be available for educational access and use by local students and teachers, including the study of wetland and riparian ecology, ranch management, and ecological restoration. Educational activities on the Chadwick Ranch will reach approximately 340 children per year from the Loyalton public schools. In addition, as part of the conservation easement, the land owner will allow FRLT to use the property for organized tours by groups.
- ✓ **Protection of Publically Important Scenic Resources:** The easement would result in permanent protection of the scenic open space and vistas, as viewed from Highway 49, a State-designated Scenic Byway, which forms the southern boundary of the property; from Sierra County Road A24 (Beckwith Road), which forms the eastern boundary of the property; and from the City of Loyalton, Sierra County's largest City, also located along the eastern boundary of the property.

Scope of Work: Landowner Anne Chadwick has signed a Willing Seller Letter indicating her willingness to sell a conservation easement to FRLT (see attached) and FRLT expects to enter into an option agreement with her by December 31, 2012 for an easement purchase price of \$150,000 (pending final appraisal) and a closing date of October 31, 2013. FRLT will leverage SNC funding 1.3:1 with an additional \$95,000 from the Northern Sierra Partnership and a \$30,000 stewardship endowment contribution from the landowner.

Project Summary

Feather River Land Trust (FRLT) requests \$97,750 to help purchase a conservation easement over the 142-acre Chadwick Ranch, located immediately adjacent to Loyalton Elementary and High Schools in Sierra County. The conservation easement would guarantee permanent educational access to this land and protect a working ranch, wildlife habitat, and scenic open space.

The property is 142 acres of irrigated pasture, wetlands, and exceptional cottonwood-willow riparian habitat, and includes three branches of Smithneck Creek, a major tributary to the Middle Fork Feather River.

FRLT will complete and record the easement by October 2013.

Environmental Setting

The Chadwick Ranch is located in Sierra County in the southeastern portion of the 120,000-acre Sierra Valley. Sierra Valley is the center of the northern Sierra’s agricultural economy, containing more than 90,000 acres zoned for agricultural use, 40,000 irrigated acres, and supporting approximately 80 working ranches and farms in Plumas and Sierra Counties. The property is currently zoned Agriculture (A-1) and is being used for beef cattle grazing and alfalfa and grass hay production. The land is irrigated via a combination of flood and sprinkler irrigation. Surrounding properties to the south, west, and north are also zoned Agriculture and used for cattle grazing; a large portion of the Grandi Ranch to the northeast of the property is zoned Agriculture and used for alfalfa hay production. The City of Loyalton is located east and directly across County Road A24 from the property and is zoned for residential and educational uses and development. Sierra County’s General Plan strongly protects productive agricultural land, only permitting one residence per 640 acres within Agriculturally-zoned (A-1) areas, among other restrictions. Consequently, the Chadwick Ranch Conservation Easement project is consistent with the Sierra County General Plan and associated zoning. The intended educational uses of the property which would be permitted by the conservation easement are compatible with the property’s agricultural uses and zoning.

5b. Workplan and Schedule Narrative

Task	Status	Complete
Funding proposals to Northern Sierra Partnership (NSP)	Complete	March 2012
Obtain funding allocation from NSP	Complete	April 2012
Escrow account, Preliminary Title Report (PTR),	Complete	July 2012
Funding proposal to SNC	Complete	October 2012
Property appraisal	In progress	December 2012

Enter into 10-month option agreement with landowner	In progress	December 31, 2012
Complete Baseline documentation Report		September 2013
Finalize project due diligence, including updated Preliminary Title Report and Phase I ESA	In progress	September 2013
Close escrow; transfer of Conservation Easement to FRLT	Pending funding	October 31, 2013
6 Month progress report to SNC	Pending funding	November 2013
Establish Stewardship and Legal Defense Funds	Pending funding	November 2013
Final Report to SNC	Pending funding	May, 2014

5c. Restrictions, Technical/Environmental Documents and Agreements Narrative

Restrictions & Agreements:

Based on discussions with the landowner, title report, and field visits, there are no property restrictions and/or encumbrances that could adversely impact project completion. Eiven Grandi's current 3-year grazing lease with landowner Anne Chadwick is compatible with project and its completion, as is the property's Williamson Act Contract.

Regulatory & Requirements/Permits:

We hereby declare that there are no known regulatory requirements, California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), or other federal, state, or local permits required to complete the proposed conservation easement. The proposed conservation easement is "Not a Project" per CEQA as it does not meet the definition of a "Project" as defined by the California Code of Regulations. Section 15378 of Article 20 ("Definitions") of Chapter 3 (Guidelines for Implementation of the California Environmental Quality Act) of Title 14 of California Code of Regulations, clearly define a "Project" under CEQA as "...the whole of an action, which has a potential for resulting in either a direct physical change in the environment, or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment...".

The conservation easement in this application will not occur on federal lands nor will it be completed using federal funds and is therefore excluded from any further analysis under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). In addition, there are no local zoning, ordinances, or laws preventing or otherwise requiring further environmental analysis of conservation easements in Sierra County.

5d. Organizational Capacity Narrative

Since 2000, FRLT has helped conserve 36,000 acres in the Feather River region, the Sierra's largest watershed (2.4 million acres). FRLT owns, manages, and/or holds easements on approximately 6,000 acres.

With an operating budget of \$750K, FRLT has 7 staff, 850 members, and 150+ volunteers. FRLT is a founding partner of the Northern Sierra Partnership (NSP). FRLT has the expertise to plan, implement, and monitor this project. Executive Director Paul Hardy is a wildlife biologist (M.S.), serves on regional and state conservation boards, and is a founder of the Northern Sierra Partnership. Conservation Consultant Jason Moghaddas is a Registered Professional Forester, former wildland firefighter, and resource management expert. Attorney Jim Olmsted has 23 years' expertise with public access, easements, and fee title management for land trusts. Stewardship Director Gabe Miller's expertise is in land management, monitoring, and partnering with local ranchers and Resource Conservation Districts. Conservation and stewardship staff will monitor the easement. Learning Landscapes Coordinator Rob Wade has led FRLT's school-based conservation and education program for 10 years, working with landowners and local schools to engage them in conservation, restoration, and education activities in keeping with FRLT's conservation and stewardship standards.

5e. Cooperation and Community Support Narrative

Partners for this project include the landowner, the grazing lessee, the Plumas-Sierra Joint Unified School District and Loyalton Schools, the Northern Sierra Partnership, and through this request, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. To date, FRLT and our collaborative partners have committed over \$95,000 to the project.

We have consulted with Sierra County Supervisors Peter Huebner (Chair) and Bill Nunes and the project will be on the November agenda for a proposed resolution in support of the project.

There is no known opposition to the project. The project's close proximity to Loyalton public schools makes it an ideal area as a teaching resource and outdoor classroom. Upon acquisition, FRLT will work through our on-going Learning Landscapes Project to integrate use of the property into local school curricula. Completion of the project will not change current land use or zoning

Letters of support included:

- Lucy Blake, Northern Sierra Partnership
- Steven Frisch, Sierra Business Council
- Cali Griffin, Ag Education Teacher, Loyalton High School

5f. Long-Term Management and Sustainability Narrative

The landowner will pay for future costs of operations, maintenance, and stewardship of the property using revenues generated by agricultural operations on the ranch.

FRLT's long term management plan will uphold the integrity of the Chadwick Ranch easement in perpetuity. In accordance with the Land Trust Alliance's Standards and Practices, FRLT will monitor the easement annually, work with Sierra County Planning to ensure compliance, and legally defend the easement. A \$25,000 stewardship fund and a \$5,000 legal defense fund, both donated by landowner Anne Chadwick, will be established at closing.

The easement protects and monitors the Chadwick Ranch's conservation values, including a diverse host of fish and wildlife species, key migratory and winter habitat for the Truckee-Loyalton Deer Herd, a working ranch landscape, and educational access for Loyalton schools.

5g. Performance Measures Narrative

People Reached: The conserved ranch will be a Learning Landscapes outdoor classroom for Loyalton Elementary, Loyalton Middle School, and Loyalton High Schools, serving 340 students per year. Protection of these Sierra Valley riparian, wet meadow, and upland meadow habitats will benefit downstream water users.

Resources Leveraged: An additional \$125,000 investment into the Sierra, including matching funds for the pre-acquisition costs, easement purchase, legal and stewardship endowment, and easement management.

Jobs Created: Support 1 ranching family, 1/2 easement stewardship job

Economic Activities: Angus beef production, haying operation, and carbon sequestration.

Acres Conserved: 142 acres will be permanently conserved.

Linear Feet of Stream Bank: 6,600 feet (1.25 miles) of perennial stream protected along three branches of Smithneck Creek, providing exceptional cottonwood-willow habitat for a host of unique fish and wildlife species.

Sites Protected: The easement will protect no known historical or cultural sites. The property includes an historic barn that is collapsing, but protection and restoration of the barn are not included in the goals of the easement.

5h. Budget Narrative

Costs and sources of funding of the Chadwick Ranch Conservation Easement are as follows:

- Sierra Nevada Conservancy, \$97,750 total (\$85,000 = capital for easement acquisition; \$12,750 = admin and overhead)

- Northern Sierra Partnership, \$95,000 total [\$65,000 = capital for easement acquisition; \$30,000 pre-acquisition project costs, including title (\$500), appraisal (\$8,000), hazmat (\$5,000), baseline (\$6,000), direct staff time (\$6,000), and legal (\$4,500)]
- Landowner, \$30,000 total (for Stewardship Endowment and Legal Defense Fund)
- **Total Project Cost = \$222,750 (including \$150,000 in capital for easement acquisition)**