

5. Narrative Descriptions-

a. Detailed Project Description- This grant will provide funding to complete all needed planning necessary to secure funding for purchase of a conservation easement (CE) in the future. The CE will protect the unique values of the historic Ratto Ranch in perpetuity. The 238 acre ranch is located near the city limits of Sonora, California. Residential development pressure in the area is high and bordering ranches have recently subdivided. Residential development borders the property, where roads and new homes are currently under construction. In addition to the agricultural resource of the working cattle operation, there are many other notable values worth protecting; wetlands, vernal pools, rare plants, rare animals, historic buildings, movie production site, and scenery values for scenic State Highway 49. The current owner, Alton McRae, wishes to preserve the working ranch through a conservation easement that will protect the property into perpetuity. This landowner is willing to donate a significant portion of the CE value.

Proposition 84 related benefits include protection of the vernal pools, wetlands, wildlife habitat, rare plants, and scenic values. The CE will protect water quality within Peppermint Creek (a tributary of the Tuolumne River) near the headwaters. The wetlands function as a buffer to upstream active residential development. Peppermint Falls is a local landmark, where this creek spills over the Table Mountain escarpment about one milece downstream from the property.

SNC mission and program goals are met through the following;

- The 140 year history of the property as a working ranch will be protected. The CE will assure the agricultural land is available and will help maintain the economic viability of the operations.
- The property contains notable environmental values worth protecting. These are detailed in the following environmental setting section; The land is located between public wild lands (New Melones/BLM and Stanislaus National Forest). The property serves as a refuge along a corridor between National Forest and New Melones public lands of increasingly fragmented habitat on private lands.
- The escarpments of Table Mountain along the western boundary of the property are a prominent feature of the local landscape, providing a scenic backdrop along State Highway 49, a designated State Scenic Route near Columbia State Historic Park. Protection of this scenery supports Tourism, the #1 economic component of the local economy. This also supports the quality of life for local residents.
- The active ranch and historic buildings are surrounded by rolling grasslands framed by blue oak woodlands. This classic western landscape has been used for dozens of films and TV productions including; High Noon, Lassie, The Birds, Little House on the Prairie, The Big Valley, and others. These film productions have boosted the local economy and are a source of pride for the community.

The economic viability of the current cattle ranch operations and other future farming activities will be assured through the CE. In addition to protection of the ranch, this project will have the following outcomes;

- Planning activities will involve numerous partners, resulting in a compilation of the Ratto Ranch story and documentation of the environmental values. It will serve as a prototype for TCLT and help advance its capacity and mission.
- The Ratto Ranch story and CE will serve as a marketing tool to promote protection of other ranches, understanding of conservation principles, and as an educational resource for individuals, local schools, and Columbia College.
- The Ratto Ranch's combination of notable attributes will serve as a beacon to attract partners, develop relationships, and advance many of the goals of the SNC within Tuolumne County in the future.

Project Summary-

The Tuolumne County Land Trust (TCLT) requests \$19,650 to complete site assessments, draft a conservation easement, and contract and review an appraisal for the Ratto Ranch in Tuolumne County, CA. This 238 acre ranch is the top priority project for TCLT because of the unique combination of environmental and historical resources found on the property. In a landscape where ranchlands are quickly being consumed by development, the protection of this working ranch and the telling of its 'story' are regionally significant. Marketing of conservation principles will occur along with required planning activities.

Historical and Environmental Site Assessments- Local experts (partners) and consultants will complete an assessment of the site's unique historic, environmental, and cultural assets. Some research has already been done on these elements but is piecemeal. A more robust understanding of these resources will establish the value of this property and will help build the 'Ratto Ranch Story.' This Story will be beneficial in helping TCLT reach out to additional funding sources and to help others understand the significance of this property to the region. This assessment will include surveys, research, photography, and mapping of the physical, biological, and cultural attributes of the property. It will detail the history of ranch operations, film making, while documenting endemic plants, animals, and other known attributes. Recommendations will be made for the following; preservation of historic structures and rare plants, woodland management, improvement of grassland pasture and wetlands. The assessment will be made available to the public and will be used internally for fundraising, public outreach, marketing, and educational purposes.

The **Conservation Easement** will be drafted. For this task TCLT will work either with outside consultants or others within the land trust community such as The Trust for Public Land. TCLT does not have experience drafting Conservation Easements, however, several members of our board have worked with these documents in the past. This task is considered a capacity building item as it will provide TCLT the experience to complete future conservation easements at a reduced cost and greater expertise.

A **Baseline Study** will be generated with consultants and TCLT volunteers. This Baseline Study will be referenced within the Conservation Easement and will serve as the basis for future monitoring.

A **Monitoring Plan** will be prepared by consultants and TCLT volunteers. This Plan will ensure that the terms of the conservation easement are met into the future. The Monitoring Plan will also establish as basis by which TCLT can better understand the ongoing costs associated with this project. This understanding will provide TCLT a framework to define the funding needed for TCLT to steward this and other properties in the future.

An **Appraisal** will be conducted by a qualified partner or consultant to establish the value of the CE. The appraisal will inform negotiations with the land owner who has indicated a willingness to donate a large portion of the CE's value.

Appraisal Review by the State's Department of General Services will likely be required for funding of the Conservation Easement and is included as a line item in this grant application.

This grant application also requests funding for Indirect Costs related to the compilation of the "**Ratto Ranch Story**." This undertaking will build upon the Historical and Environmental Site Assessments. This information will form the basis for printed material as well as animated elements (interviews, film clips from movies, etc.). This Story will be beneficial in helping TCLT reach out to the community, attract additional funding sources, and to help others understand the significance of this property to the region's history, culture and environment.

Environmental Setting-

The Ratto Ranch has remained in the family as a working ranch since 1874, when it was patented. Italian immigrants first cropped vegetables and grains for local use but also exported much over Sonora Pass to the Eastern Sierra mine fields. Irrigation water was available (and still is) from a nearby miner's ditch. Most of the agricultural land in the vicinity has been displaced by residential development, which currently is underway along the eastern boundary of the property. The property is currently part of a dry land cattle and calf operation. The grasslands that comprise most of the property are in good health with no evidence of noxious weeds. Following are some of the notable values of the property;

- The majority of the property is productive open grassland that is seasonally grazed by cattle but portions of the property have many rare plants and animals. (See list in the appendix).
- This property has been a working ranch in the family since 1874 and was likely used agriculturally prior to that date.

- The two story ranch house was constructed in 1909, but several earlier structures are also present. These antique structures meet the criteria for locally significant cultural resources under both the Tuolumne County criteria and California criteria. The preserved set of ranch structures appear as they did 100 years ago, with no obvious modern additions. This is unique in the area.
- The property is zoned AE-37 (Agricultural, 37 Acre Minimum) and is designated Agricultural Exclusive (AE) in the Tuolumne County General Plan. The County General Plan rates it as high value agricultural land.
- The property is currently within a Williamson Act Contract (Land Conservation Act- State and County program), but given concerns regarding the long term viability of the Williamson Act, the landowner is interested in placing a conservation easement over the property that will last into perpetuity.
- The headwaters of Peppermint Creek (a tributary of the Tuolumne River) pass through a wetland on the lower portion of the property. This wetland provides a hydrologic buffer from the increased storm water runoff and pollution impacts of upstream development.
- The upper portion of the property has a very different character. It includes a portion of the famous Table Mountain formation, complete with Northern Basaltic Vernal Pools and associated rare plants. Table Mountain was formed by a lava flow originating near Mammoth California. It is one of the world's longest flows and the Jamestown area is well preserved; however the Sonora and Columbia area of the flow is largely unprotected. There is a spectacular show of wildflowers in the spring.
- The rolling open grassland is framed by several knolls of blue oak and pine, providing a refuge for wildlife.
- The escarpments of Table Mountain along the western boundary of the property are a prominent feature of the local landscape, providing a scenic backdrop along State Highway 49, a designated State Scenic Route near Columbia State Historic Park. Seen at less than a mile, any built structures would be highly visible on the ridgeline, ruining the pristine view.
- The classic western setting has been used for dozens of films and TV productions including; High Noon, Charge of the Light Brigade, Lassie, The Birds, Little House on the Prairie, The Big Valley, and others.
- The property has been used by colleges to study geology and botany. Despite being hidden from direct public view, there are many public requests to hike on the property. Preservation of the ranch and possibly adjacent properties will be a valuable asset in the future. Trails would be easy to construct. Sonora's popular network of public trails at Dagoon Gulch is one mile from the property. Potential exists to link the two in the future.

b. Workplan and schedule-

Work with partners, Community Outreach, and collaboration- The TCLT will provide a leadership role in working with others to complete this project. Local experts will be invited to perform key tasks as part of the team. Consultants will be hired through this grant to perform activities that can not be performed by volunteers. TCLT will use this project to expand existing partnerships and visibility in the community. In addition to the CE, the “Ratto Ranch Story” will be compiled along with the site studies and assessments. The Following is a discussion of the primary components of this project and who may be involved.

- **Involvement of organizations-** The Trust of Public Land (TPL), California Rangeland Trust, Sierra Cascade Land Trust, and other organizations may provide resources, oversight, and specific contributions that are not locally available. As a prototype project for TCLT it is essential to use processes and practices pioneered by more experienced land trusts. Local resources that may contribute are; Columbia College (geology and GIS mapping), Historic Commissions, Tuolumne County Staff, Tuolumne County Film Commission (compilation of films made at the ranch), University of California Cooperative Extension, Agriculture Advisor, Farm Bureau (Rangeland), Resource Conservation District’s Stream Team (water quality), Audubon (bird habitat), California Native Plant Society (Rare Plants), California Fish and Game (habitat), NRCS (soils), US Forest Service and US Fish and Wildlife (woodlands and rare species).
- **Historical and Environmental Site Assessments-** Surveys, mapping, and reports will be prepared on the existing conditions and history of the property. In addition to the above organizations, there are individuals likely to volunteer services or perform them at a reduced rate. TCLT has an impressive skill set among directors and members. Many are licensed in the fields of Landscape Architecture, Wildlife Biology, and Realty. Professional experts are also available for photography, filming, publishing, planning, and writing. Experts will review and supplement the work of others to compile and complete the assessment.
- **Conservation Easement-** Following the assessment, the CE will be drafted with the help of TPL, CRT, legal experts, and others. TCLT will be working directly with the land owner during this process. This will be used as a prototype for future projects and an opportunity to learn.
- **The Baseline Study, Monitoring Plan, and Management Plan-** These will be done concurrent with and following the drafting of the CE. Local resources as outlined above will be involved in applying the information compiled in the site assessments. Experts will review and complete the work of others.
- **Appraisal and Review-** The appraisal will be performed independently by a licensed and qualified practitioner. TCLT and partners will provide oversight in the selection of the appraiser and the review process by the state (if necessary).
- **The Ratto Ranch Story-** The facts and information compiled through the assessments will be woven into a set of products and with many associated activities. Presentations will be made at local organization meetings as the project proceeds. This will initially help attract volunteers to perform required

tasks. Once the assessment is complete, the story will be told through written narrative, photography, and film. Products will be used to market the project, seeking media coverage. The products will serve as educational material for site visits by elementary through college classes and individuals. The Ratto Ranch Story should greatly enhance the prospects for funding of the CE. It will be used in TCLT activities to attract donors, expand membership, and further the cause of conservation in the region.

c. Restrictions- N/A This is a category 2 planning project.

d. Organizational Capacity- The Tuolumne County Land Trust has been incorporated for 27 years. During this history it has successfully accomplished many transactions, and facilitated a number of projects. Several of the board members are licensed professionals with skills that will be applied to this project. Due to its standing in the community, additional resources can be called upon when needed. TCLT is capable of providing the leadership to manage the project with the partners, consultants, and volunteers that will be involved. Partners and paid consultants will supplement the skills and resources of the TCLT, as has been done with other projects.

e. Cooperation and Community Support-

Section b above has identified the many partners that may be involved in the completion of the project. An open and inclusive process will be followed among the organizations and individuals that decide to be involved. Individuals that are familiar with the property are passionate about the idea of protecting it. They see the roads being built and the houses being constructed nearby about its rich history and resources. Most people in the community are unaware of the ranch and can benefit by learning. This project is ideal to market the principles of conservation, especially within the ranch community that has been slow to embrace the idea of land trusts and CEs. There is no known opposition, except perhaps for developers that would love to acquire the property. We expect the community to not only support the project, but to celebrate it. This project has the potential to bring together people that have been in opposition in the past, transforming relationships to achieve future conservation activities together.

f. Long Term Management and Sustainability

The activities funded through this project will result in a CE that protects the values historical and natural resources, the economic well being of the ranch, and future public benefits. An endowment will be adequate to assure that the CE is enforced and that the values of the property are retained in perpetuity.

g. Performance Measures-

1. Number of People Reached- Due to the outreach for partners and skills, this project will be highly visible. *The Ratto Ranch Story* will be told in numerous public meetings and in a variety of medias. I would expect local radio and newspapers will have a strong interest once the project gets going. The final products of this grant, in particular *The Ratto Ranch Story* will be a timeless resource for educational purposes in the

future. The property will increase in value as a recreation resource, especially if public access rights (such as a trail easement) are granted in the future. This will be addressed during the project with the landowner.

The project will provide the Tuolumne County Land Trust the visibility to simultaneously market its mission and the benefits of conservation easements. As a prototype, the project will serve as a model to build understanding, relationships, and support that will lead to future projects. The project will be valuable for earning the trust of the ranching community and other land owners leading to future projects.

2. Dollar Value of Resources Leveraged for the Sierra Nevada. Just as with the number of people reached, the resources leveraged by the SNC will be matched or complemented by the efforts of partners, and volunteers. It is possible that the funding provided by the SNC can be reduced through these efforts.

3. Number and Type of Jobs Created- Funded actions will provide a limited amount of work for the paid consultants, but the greater value will be the preservation of current job opportunities relating to the working cattle operations and occasional film making.

This activity is a significant boost to the local economy when it occurs. Protection of scenic quality supports of the tourism industry, which is the county's #1 economic activity. Although the project can not easily claim a specific number of jobs as a consequence of the project, there is definite benefit to the local economy.

4. Number of New, Improved or Preserved Economic Activities- The assessments may identify activities to improve the ranch, resulting in some improved economic activity. As an example, soil and range studies may lead to increased productivity. Assessment of the old structures will likely identify methods stabilize or restore them. Film making may be the primary benefit. This activity is a significant boost to the local economy when it occurs. Protection of scenic quality directly supports filming and indirectly supports the related tourism industry, which is the county's #1 economic activity.

17. Number of Collaboratively Developed Plans and Assessments - At least 4 separate areas will involve collaboration. All of the described activities of the project will be approached collaboratively, with the exception of the appraisal. The studies, assessments, and plans will be very collaborative in nature. *The Ratto Ranch Story* will lead to collaboration during the discovery phase and especially with the use and adaptation of it for educational purposes.

18. Percent of Pre-Project and Planning Efforts Resulting in Project Implementation – We intend to achieve 100% of the implementation that planning efforts are directed at. Our partners, such as TPL, are aware of funding sources that can complete the CE. The EEMP program is one that is being explored and others will be sought. *The Ratto Ranch Story* will facilitate the marketing of this project to funders. We also expect the scope of this project to be expanded to adjacent properties that share some of the same values.

19. Measurable Changes in Knowledge or Behavior - Along with preservation of the ranch, this is perhaps the greatest benefit of the endeavor. As described in previous sections, TCLT intends to use this project as a prototype and marketing vehicle. We expect awareness of conservation easements to result in more landscapes being protected, especially ranch lands. *Ratto Ranch Story* will be used for educational purposes that results in greater knowledge and appreciation for the protection of special places. We believe the benefits will be regional in scope, given the cultural and natural resources of the ranch.