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508 acres bought for river parkway

\$10m deal part of goal to open 22 miles of San Joaquin to public.

By George Hostetter

The Fresno Bee

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The effort to complete the 22-mile San Joaquin River Parkway has taken a major step forward with the recent purchase of the Spano River Ranch in north Fresno.

The 508-acre ranch is west of Freeway 41, with about 90% of the land on the Fresno County side of the river. The transaction was completed Aug. 25, and the price was approximately \$10 million.

All of the participants in the deal say it marks a pivotal point in the quest to acquire 5,900 acres for a public parkway that will stretch from Friant Dam to Freeway 99.

"It is an incredibly key property for the parkway," said Dave Koehler, executive director for the San Joaquin River Parkway and Conservation Trust. "This is the single largest property acquisition that I know of in the parkway."

Melinda Marks, executive officer of the San Joaquin River Conservancy, said the Spano Ranch deal puts the parkway at the halfway mark toward its goal of acquiring land.

"It's very clear that this is going to be a nice, big, contiguous regional gathering place for people who like the outdoors," Marks said.

Stan Spano, whose father, the late Oscar Spano, purchased the largest portion of the ranch more than 40 years ago, said he is pleased that the land will be enjoyed by the public. "I think it will benefit everybody," he said.

Spano said he and two partners had once considered turning the property into a residential and commercial development. That plan met opposition, he said, so he turned to the River Parkway Trust. The negotiations took about seven years, he said.

Coke Hallowell, president of the River Parkway Trust's board, thanked Spano "for choosing this alternative."

The deal with the Spano family was negotiated by the River Parkway Trust and the Trust for Public Land, a national organization that helps local land trusts. The two land trusts also put together the funding package, which included \$4 million from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. The remaining money came from various state sources.

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About two-thirds of the former Spano Ranch is now owned by the San Joaquin River Conservancy, a state agency. The other third is owned by the California State Lands Commission.

Spano said his family raised cattle and grew cotton on the ranch. The Spano family retained ownership of a 20-acre parcel in the middle of the former ranch. If the parcel is transferred out of the Spano family's ownership, the River Parkway Trust has the first right to purchase it.

Koehler and Marks said it's too early to say what their organizations envision for the land. They describe several scenarios, including an extension of the Lewis Eaton Trail that ends a short distance from the former Spano Ranch.

All of their ideas walk that fine line between making the land easily accessible to the public and maintaining or enhancing the natural habitat for wildlife.

The land is, by any definition, stunning. Koehler, Marks, Spano and Hallowell stood Wednesday morning on the bluff in north Fresno and gazed in silence at the beauty stretching below them.

Nearest to the bluff was the golden rubble of the old cattle ranch. In the distance were trees and bushes. Beyond them was the river.

The former Spano Ranch stretches along the river for about 13/4 miles from the Freeway 41 bridge to a landmark called Broken Bridge, so-called for obvious reasons.

Koehler and Marks say they would like to develop a program that would enable the public to take canoe trips from one bridge to the other. The 90-minute journey would give people a sense of the river's many charms, they say.

Koehler, Marks and Gavin Gladding, the River Parkway Trust's land stewardship coordinator, took a Bee reporter and photographer on such a trip Wednesday. "It is a wonderful feeling being down there on the river," Spano said.

The trip proved him right.

Trout, some a foot long or longer, swim slowly in the clear, cool water. Occasionally, a great-blue heron takes off, its immense wings laboring mightily and successfully. Oak trees and an occasional cottonwood line the river banks.

Gravel trucks sometimes roar by on the Madera County side, but their days are numbered, Koehler and Marks say.

The hustle and bustle of Fresno seem a continent away.

Spano summed up the experience: "It's amazing."

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