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Tattered economy has a silver lining for conservationists

With developers and speculators on the sidelines, desirable property is on the market for a fraction of its former price.

By Julie Cart, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from Volcano Lake—

The news is distressing: A cratering real estate market, tight-fisted banks unwilling to make loans and no appetite among elected officials to let go of a dime.

So why are conservationists smiling?



Sierra Buttes is reflected in Upper Sardine Lake at sunrise. (Rich Reid, The Trust for Public Land / August 7, 2011)

It turns out that the tattered economy has cracked open a window of opportunity for groups seeking to set aside land for preservation. With property developers and speculators on the

sidelines — and cautious folks electing to forgo building that cabin in the woods — desirable land is on the market for a fraction of its former price.

And thanks to laws extending tax breaks and other incentives, rural residents are lining up as never before to work with local land trusts in hopes of saving the family farm.

"There are some extraordinary deals out there, from [parcels in] the North Woods of Maine to timber companies divesting because there are no housing starts and they can't sell their lumber," said Rand Wentworth, president of the Land Trust Alliance.

Statistics are difficult to come by, but anecdotal evidence suggests that land conservation rates have maintained the pace of the first half of the decade. Total acres set aside by local, state and national trusts doubled from 2000 to 2005; a snapshot for 2005 to 2010 will be released in coming months.

To make the most of their current opportunity, conservation groups are putting together complicated, leveraged deals involving bond money from state agencies, grants from federal departments and, increasingly, large donations from private individuals.

Jim Morgan is one of them.

The Silicon Valley pioneer — who spent nearly 30 years as chief executive of [Applied Materials](#), one of the world's largest microchip companies — started coming to the northern Sierra in the late 1960s, skiing in the winter and hiking in the summer. In the '90s, Morgan and his family began pondering how to preserve the region and create a once-in-a-lifetime conservation legacy.

"I like bringing complex ideas together and solving problems," Morgan, 72, said while enjoying a sandwich on a bright, warm day beside Volcano Lake. Even deep into summer, snow lingered on the shoulders of the peaks, setting rugged rock faces in sharp relief. The lake shimmered, clear and mirror-like.

"Look around," he said. "How could you not want to preserve this for the future?"

So Morgan in 2008 dangled a \$10-million carrot in front of a handful of conservation groups and set forth a challenge: You can use this money only if you work cooperatively and strategically to preserve a swath of the High Sierra that sweeps north from Lake Tahoe — a world of granite peaks, deep alpine lakes and dappled meadows that supply most of California's fresh water.

The Northern Sierra Partnership was born, bringing together national conservation heavyweights such as the Trust for Public Land and the Nature Conservancy, the California-based Resources Legacy Fund and local organizations such as the Truckee Donner Land Trust, the Feather River Land Trust and the Sierra Business Council.

While the goal of such cooperative efforts is often to preserve watersheds and provide a haven for plants and animals, many philanthropists focus on ensuring that traditional uses and public access are maintained.

In some cases, private land is acquired and opened for hiking and fishing. Conservation easements can be written to allow for livestock grazing and timber cutting.

Last year, the Trust for Public Land and the Truckee Donner Land Trust negotiated with Sierra Pacific Industries to place 4,000 acres of critical watershed in a conservation easement, the first ever agreed to by the state's largest private landowner. The deal prohibits clear-cutting and the use of some herbicides, but allows timber harvesting. The easement also allows for public access to the land.

And this summer, state groups brokered the purchase of the last parcel of private land on the face of Sierra Buttes, 835 acres that includes Volcano and Young America Lake, a segment of the Pacific Crest Trail and other popular hiking routes.

At the height of the real estate market, rural families had a difficult time saying no to million-dollar offers from developers. But the extension of a handful of tax incentives has made it easier for them to join forces with local groups to place farmland into trusts and easements.

"Conservation easements allow people to get their equity out of the property and still keep it," said Jason Moghaddas of the Feather River Trust, based in Quincy, Calif.

And, when it comes to supporting land conservation with tax dollars, voters seem ready. "Red states and blue states vote green when it comes to preserving places they care about," said [Will Rogers](#), president of Trust for Public Lands.

National conservation groups envy California, with its easy-on-the-eyes landscapes and a citizenry willing to approve bond measures to preserve oak woodlands, granite mountain ranges and coastal shorelines.

"People feel very strongly about California," said Ellen Fred, an attorney with the Berkeley-based Conservation Partners. "The beauty is very grandiose, over the top.... It's hard not to fall deeply in love with the landscape. Developers aren't beating down the doors, so if you have the wherewithal to give, you are going to give. "

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