

Entry for the Agricultural, Environment & Natural Resources 2020 CSAC Challenge Award

Overview

In 1991 the Resource Recovery & Waste Management Division (RRWMD) of the Santa Barbara County Public Works Department purchased a 1,083 acre agricultural/open space property known as Baron Ranch along the majestic Gaviota Coast. The purchase intended to secure an open space buffer zone adjacent to the County owned and operated Tajiguas Landfill, prevent subdivision of the ranch into rural home sites, provide potential recreational opportunity, and further preserve open space in an area adjacent to the Los Padres National Forest.

Challenge

The immediate challenge facing RRWMD was the need to maximize Tajiguas Landfill's useful life and expand the dwindling capacity at the landfill that has served the public since 1967 and might be the last local landfill in the South Coast region of Santa Barbara County. The Tajiguas Landfill is located in a rural, pristine, and ecologically rich area immediately north of the Pacific Ocean, and development is severely restricted. There are many environmentally orientated individuals and groups that take an active interest in protecting the Gaviota Coast. Therefore the challenge was, and is, balancing the need for landfill capacity with the desire to create as many environmental and community benefits as possible in the process.

Solution

RRWMD has invested money, time, dedication, and expertise toward helping Baron Ranch become a community and environmental asset. Over 50 acres of disturbed areas of the ranch have been restored to native riparian and upland habitats. Over 30 acres will be permanently preserved to provide long-term protection for several sensitive plant and wildlife species that make the ranch home. To give the public an opportunity to enjoy the ranch's beauty, RRWMD has partnered with the County of Santa Barbara Community Services Department Parks Division, the Santa Barbara County Trails Council, the Gaviota Coastal Conservancy, and other stakeholders to build and open a multi-use recreational trail.

Innovation

The most significant innovation was the vision and foresight in 1991 to see the ranch's potential value as a site for mitigation and restoration, preservation of agricultural land and open space, and public recreation. The Baron Ranch presented an opportunity to partner with other government agencies and many local groups and interested parties to showcase how agriculture, habitat/open space preservation, and recreation could successfully and productively coexist.

Results

RRWMD has worked with multiple regulatory agencies to restore 50 acres of native riparian, coastal sage scrub, and

chaparral habitats with over 39,000 new native plants, including over 11,000 trees and over 300 sensitive plants. The habitats provide essential breeding, nesting, and foraging areas for sensitive species such as the California red-legged frog, the least Bell's vireo, and the southwestern pond turtle. Other wildlife present at the ranch includes bobcat, deer, black bear, coyote, mountain lion, rattlesnake, raccoon, migratory birds, reptiles, and several raptor species.

The California red-legged frog is a threatened species that has a very safe home at Baron Ranch. The frog was popularized in Mark Twain's breakthrough 1867 short story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." In that tale the narrator observes that "You never see a frog so modest and straightfor'ard as he was, for all he was so gifted."

RRWMD has also worked with many stakeholders to allow public access and recreational use of the Ranch and restore sustainable agriculture. Please visit RRWMD's "Less Is More" website for a short video that visually conveys what words cannot about Baron Ranch: <http://lessismore.org/articles/baron-ranch-101/>

The efforts RRWMD has made in converting Baron Ranch into an ecological and community asset have helped smooth the road for the construction of the ReSource Center, a Materials Recovery and Anaerobic Digestion facility at the adjacent Tajiguas Landfill. The CSAC Merit Award winning ReSource Center will serve 210,000 area residents and businesses, divert an additional 60% of waste from the landfill, reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by annually removing the emissions equivalent of 28,668 cars, produce enough green energy to power 2,000 homes annually, and create 100 permanent living wage jobs.

Replicability

California is waging an aggressive campaign to reduce GHG emissions. There is a strong need for infrastructure to process organics and keep them out of the landfill. However, there is often significant pushback against development of any kind, especially in an environmentally unique and sensitive area. By getting out far ahead of the challenges by purchasing Baron Ranch in 1991, the County of Santa Barbara has been able to mitigate the perceived negative impacts of landfill operations into a substantial community enhancement. Other jurisdictions can certainly travel a similar path of recognizing the benefit of preservation and conservation concurrent with development, especially since landfills tend to be located in undeveloped territory, provided there is foresight and dedication to the process.

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