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Regional

RICE'S CROSSING: Six Miles of Yuba River Purchased by Bear Yuba Land Trust

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By: Bear Yuba Land Trust (BYLT)

June 25, 2014 - This week, after three years working with The Trust for Public Land (TPL) and a myriad of state, federal and local agency partners, Bear Yuba Land Trust (BYLT) acquired 2,707 acres in Nevada and Yuba counties - including six miles of Yuba River frontage - known as Rice's Crossing.



Photo: Chris Gee Chris Gee

The \$3.25 million acquisition was funded by Proposition 84 funds through the California Natural Resources Agency's River Parkways Program (\$1.9 million) and Sierra Nevada Conservancy (\$1 million) in addition to funding from the CalTrans Environmental Enhancement and Mitigation Program (\$350,000).

"The views on the ridge top are gorgeous and stretch beyond Grouse Ridge to the high Sierra. The entire Yuba watershed comes together right there and will be protected forever," said BYLT Executive Director Marty Coleman-Hunt.

"We are so grateful to our project partner, The Trust for Public Land, specifically Markley Bavinger, and the funders for working so hard to make this dream a reality."

Sandwiched between existing public lands at both ends, the property begins below New Bullard's Bar Dam and the confluence of the North and Middle Yuba River. The Yuba River cascades for six miles through a steep canyon and joins the South Yuba and Englebright Reservoir. In total, the Rice's Crossing landscape connects to nine river miles of adjacent public lands. The resulting 15 miles of this critical Sierra foothill's river flows through over 8,400 acres of now contiguous public open space along the Yuba River watershed.

The acquisition of Rice's Crossing was initiated in 2007 by a group of conservationists including Shawn Garvey and Janet Cohen who, in partnership with The Trust for Public Land, applied for initial funding. The Trust for Public Land played a critical role supporting the project, partnering with BYLT in 2011, and providing the expertise to complete the acquisition. The Sierra Fund has also remained a key project supporter and fiscal agent from beginning to end.

This keystone property now permanently conserved and kept from development is the largest to date owned by the Land Trust. The purchase follows on the heels of the acquisition of 652-acre Garden Bar Preserve on the Bear River as a working cattle ranch.

An estimated 250,000 people visit and enjoy the Yuba River every year. The acquisition and protection of Rice's Crossing will make open space and river access points available along a six mile stretch of the Yuba River, previously private property and closed to the public. BYLT is working to open sections of the landscape in stages to the public as soon as possible.



Photo: Chris Gee

River restoration, a working landscape and miles of trails

In addition to public access, the Land Trust acquisition of Rice's Crossing will pave the way for restoration of wildlife corridors and important river fish habitat disrupted by historic dam building and mining. Sustainable timber harvests and cattle grazing will play an important role in land stewardship.

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Rice's Crossing will offer miles of outstanding river corridor and river canyon ridge trails for mountain biking, horseback riding and hiking. Eventually, these trails will provide connectivity to public lands in South Yuba River State Park, Plumas National Forest, New Bullard's Bar Recreation Area and Tahoe National Forest. Other adjacent public land includes Army Corps of Engineers recreation land, the Bureau of Land Management and Yuba County Water Agency.

Already, trail crews from the Land Trust have begun scouting future trail sites, with hopes of opening the first section by year's end.

The lower reaches of Rice's Crossing near Bridgeport and South Yuba River State Park will require road building and the creation of safe river points, which is expected to take several years to construct. In the meantime this particular stretch river shorelines will be closed. When work is complete anglers and kayakers will have unprecedented river access, helping to alleviate pressures on neighboring State Parks.

"That's going to happen as quickly as we can make it happen. We are kicking off our annual Trails Appeal fundraising campaign which will build much needed financial resources to do this work," said Coleman-Hunt.

Historic hydraulic mining and dam construction caused erosion and left behind cobble that changed the course of the river. In addition, flows of water coming through Yuba County Water Agency's Colgate Powerhouse rise and fall depending on electrical demand. With Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) re-licensing of the Water Agency's projects underway, more water for fish habitat is possible.

The South Yuba River Citizens League (SYRCL) has expressed interest in restoring the river as spawning habitat for salmon in preparation for fish passage if and when it is allowed beyond Englebright Dam. Already, this section of river is considered important for trout species.

With the Land Trust now in ownership of Rice's Crossing, there is the hope for river restoration and the creation of critical habitat for fisheries such as native trout and perhaps, someday, the return of threatened and endangered salmon and steelhead.

"Our acquisition helps facilitate the restoration work. In the end the river will become a better fish habitat," Coleman-Hunt said. "In addition to the benefits of healthy natural processes, this is going to make a lot of anglers happy."

Besides the recreation component, a history of sustainable timber harvesting and cattle grazing will continue on Rice's Crossing. Cattle will graze to keep the fuel load down and timber industry jobs will be created for the surrounding communities of Dobbins and North San Juan, making this region safer from the threat of wildfire.

"The Land Trust promotes sustainable working landscapes as a land management strategy," said Coleman-Hunt. "Rice's Crossing demonstrates three parts of our conservation mission converging: the offering of public recreation, the restoration and stewardship of an aquatic and wildlife habitat, and a timber and grazing operation that promotes land health."

The land deal results in the community-supported nonprofit group's total conserved acreage within the Bear River and Yuba River watersheds to nearly 9,000 acres. A community celebration of the property will be announced next spring.

"It's a part of the river close to my childhood home where I spent a lot of time swimming and fishing. It's a great stretch of open space that's been blocked to public access," said BYLT President Andy Cassano. "It's a crowning achievement for the Land Trust and it is truly exciting for our community."

Learn more about Bear Yuba Land Trust: www.bylt.org

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