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Eastern Sierra Land Trust Wins Over \$900,000 to Fight Climate Change

Statewide program aims to avoid increases in greenhouse gas emissions by funding protection of Bridgeport Valley ranchland

Efforts to prevent increases in greenhouse gas emissions throughout California have found an ally among Eastern Sierra land conservationists. A new statewide program that aims to fight the effects of climate change has awarded Eastern Sierra Land Trust (ESLT) a grant for \$917,500 – funds that will go directly towards permanently protecting Bridgeport Valley’s historic Sceirine Point Ranch.

“Preserving open space, agricultural resources, and wildlife habitat here in the Eastern Sierra is ESLT’s goal, and Bridgeport Valley is one of those special places that embodies our region’s identity in so many ways,” commented Kay Ogden, ESLT Executive Director. “Knowing that our efforts to protect the Sceirine Point Ranch have been recognized as not only valuable to maintaining the legacy of our region, but also critical to the health and future of our entire state – it’s a real victory for everyone.”

The Sustainable Agricultural Land Conservation (SALC) program selected ESLT from amidst a highly competitive pool of applicants from across the state partly due to the Bridgeport Valley’s potential for development. Recently introduced by California’s Strategic Growth Council and administered by the Affordable Housing and Sustainable Communities program, the SALC awards California Climate Investments assets that result from the state’s cap-and-trade auctions. By funding land conservation projects such as ESLT’s on the Sceirine Point Ranch, the SALC aims to prevent emissions increases that result from developing farmland.

The Sceirine Point Ranch has been owned and operated by the same ranching family for over 130 years. In 2013, the property’s landowners approached ESLT to learn about tools to preserve their ranch’s agricultural value and wildlife habitat for future generations. At over 2,400 acres, the ranch has productive irrigated meadows that provide vital summer range for cattle as well as key habitat for wildlife – including the Greater sage-grouse, which uses the property year-round.

A rare bird species that has recently been considered for listing under the Endangered Species Act, the Bi-State population of Greater sage-grouse is often found co-existing with well-managed grazing operations, such as those at the Sceirine Point Ranch. In 2014 the Natural Resources Conservation Service awarded ESLT a \$3 million grant through their Agricultural Conservation Easement Program to protect this property because of the important role that its irrigated pasture lands play as sage-grouse habitat.

But an estimated \$4 million was required to pay the fair market value of the conservation easement that would protect the Sceirine Point Ranch against future development – so ESLT turned to the new SALC program to obtain the additional funding needed. Now with support from federal, state, and local levels, ESLT and the landowner can move forward towards safeguarding Sceirine Point Ranch forever.

With other conservation easements nearby, establishing one at the Sceirine Point Ranch would add to the protected land in the area. Under the terms of the easement, land ownership would

remain private, keeping the property on Mono County tax rolls, and the landowner would continue to be responsible for managing the property. Purchased from the landowner with funds awarded by the SALC and the federal Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, the easement would restrict certain future uses and limit building and subdivision in order to protect important habitat, as well as the agricultural and scenic values of the land.

“There’s still so much work to be done – these grant funds cannot cover all of the operational costs required to get to the point where we can purchase this and other agricultural conservation easements,” commented Kay Ogden. “To achieve this success, ESLT will ultimately rely on the continued support of our Eastern Sierra community.”

Nevertheless, the SALC award represents a major step towards the permanent protection of the Sceirine Point Ranch, and supporting landowners throughout the Bridgeport Valley to limit poorly-planned development and harmful emissions increases. “Funding sources are tighter than ever these days. Without the SALC grant, completing this large-scale project might have been impossible,” continued Kay. “This award is a momentous honor for ESLT.”

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Low-resolution photos shown below; high-resolution photos are attached to email. For additional photos, please contact Marguerite Merritt at marguerite@eslt.org.



Picture Caption: Eastern Sierra Land Trust is helping to fight the effects of climate change by protecting agricultural land in scenic Bridgeport Valley. Photo © Stephen Ingram.

