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Deal protects land from non-agricultural use

By Elizabeth Fitzsimons

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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PAUMA VALLEY – Bill Potter bought these 85 acres in the late 1980s with the intent to develop the land into housing.

But the development industry turned upside down. Potter took time to reflect. He bought a tractor.

"I became attached to the land," he said. He wanted to conserve, not develop.

The land now will be permanently protected from development.

The organic, nonprofit farm that has leased the land from Potter for three years is buying it, with the help of state and federal grants and loans.

Darryl Young, director of the state Department of Conservation, said he hoped the action to preserve the land here would start a pattern in the county. The county's agriculture industry produces \$1.3 billion a year, and farmland is shrinking because of development.

"Agriculture is what feeds us, from a physical standpoint and from a spiritual standpoint," Young said.

The \$1.9 million grant allows the farm, Tierra Miguel Foundation, and its partner, the Fallbrook Land Conservancy, to create an agricultural



NADIA BOROWSKI SCOTT / Union-Tribune

Workers at the Tierra Miguel Foundation plucked bullhorn thistle weeds from in between rows of a variety of carrots called sugar snacks. The farm has bought its development rights, protecting it from non-agricultural use.

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conservation easement. Under the terms of the easement, no non-agricultural development may ever occur on the land.

The state conservation department, through its California Farmland Conservancy Program, granted \$1.64 million toward the purchase and the development rights. The U.S. Department of Agriculture granted \$233,000, for development rights, through its Natural Resources Conservation Service's Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program.

Through the state program, local governments and nonprofits receive grants to buy development rights from willing landowners. This creates permanent conservation easements.

The state has granted about 100 agricultural conservation projects, but Tierra Miguel is the first south of Santa Barbara.

"We go to where the land is the best and has the best features," Young said.

Those lands typically are large chunks that can buffer nearby development, such as in the Salinas Valley, where there was a significant threat of development from the high-tech Silicon Valley. Protected lands range in size from about 80 to 1,000 acres.

In the case of Tierra Miguel, the farm is buying the development rights and the property. The farm will have two years to repay the state the \$1.4 million it is paying for the land.

Tierra Miguel is an educational demonstration farm where schoolchildren come to learn about organic farming and healthy eating. The farm sends boxes of produce for classroom learning programs and distributes produce to 300 shareholders in San Diego, Los Angeles, Orange and Riverside counties.

Practicing community-supported agriculture, the farm creates a direct relationship with the consumer; there is no store in between.

Yesterday, farm employees, state and federal officials and well-wishers crowded in the shade and batted at gnats – that came for the compost – and toured the farm.

"This is the starting point for many of the crops in the field," said Robert Farmer, as he led a group into a greenhouse. The tables were covered with flats of soil. The tiny leaves would eventually grow into a head of lettuce, said Farmer, who teaches schoolchildren about the farm.

The trays are then moved outside, to toughen the small plants before they are set into the soil.

Wallace Tucker, chairman of the Fallbrook Land Conservancy, said rural, agricultural landscapes are a fundamental part of the county's

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landscape.

"There's just something about a working farm that inspires you," he said. "We need to have these productive, healthy landscapes that inspire us all."

To learn more about Tierra Miguel, visit its web site, at <http://www.tierramiguel.org>.

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