

Feather River Land Trust ... a decade down the road to always

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A decade ago, 10 friends shared a vision to preserve the unique beauty of the region— and the Feather River Land Trust was born. With a mere \$47 in the bank, the group clearly possessed more conviction than cash. Undeterred by lack of funds however, these 10 individuals continued to volunteer their time to the preservation and restoration of the Feather River watershed. And it seems their investment has paid off. Today, FRLT employs seven full-time staff members, has protected nearly 30,000 acres, recruited more than 650 individual members and grown its operating and land acquisition budget into seven digits.

“When you’ve been at anything for a decade, it’s a sign of commitment,” said executive director Paul Hardy in a recent interview. “Results accumulate.”

When asked what he sees as the decade’s highlights, Hardy promptly responds—relationships with area landowners. A waiting list of more than 50 landowners eager to work with the land trust is a clear indicator the organization has earned the community’s trust.

The Tony Maddalena family is one such relationship. Back in 2003, the Maddalenas sold 571 acres to the land trust. The property now features an interpretive trail with signage describing the unique ecological features and historical and cultural uses for the land. And the Maddalenas still graze their cattle on the land as well.

In the Maddalena example, as with most of the land trust property acquisitions, the land is now used by more people for more activities.

Stewardship Coordinator Gabe Miller said, “We use sustainable agriculture methods to cultivate ranching and working landscapes while at the same time protecting ecological values and taking every opportunity to connect people to the land through education and recreation.”

A major evolution and theme running through all of FRLT’s work is connecting people to the land. The group believes its work is never just about conserving land, but also about restoring the community’s relationship to the land.

The Learning Landscapes program, which aims to secure an adjacent site to each school in the Feather River watershed for use as an outdoor classroom, is one such effort, and another major highlight for the land trust.

Area teachers worked with the land trust to identify each of these properties, some of which were being threatened by development.

Hardy says the land trust is evolving more into a community service organization by asking community members what they feel are the most important places to preserve. Rather than focus on plots of land merely for their biodiversity or wetland appeal, the land trust also tries to preserve historical sites that mean something to the area's history.

An example is White Sulphur Springs Ranch. Working with the Mohawk Valley Stewardship Council, FRLT envisions "restoring the hotel to its former glory."

In this year's annual report Hardy wrote that FRLT is "a decade down the road to always."

As an organization that works to preserve land for future generations, the trust uses the words "in perpetuity" in many of its agreements. Simplifying the words to "always," Hardy explains the group works on its projects with the long term in mind.

"We work with attorneys to draft our conservation easements and contracts in accordance with the highest legal standards; we have contingency plans for other conservation organizations to hold our easements and lands should FRLT go out of business; we establish stewardship endowment funds for all of the lands we conserve; we are well insured; and we adhere to the best land trust standards and practices," wrote Hardy.

"All of the above increases the probability that FRLT and the conservation work it achieves will endure for the long run," he continued.

Looking forward to the future, Hardy said he sees room for growth. "We have a lot more opportunity than we have the capacity to meet right now," he said.

The group will look to join other interested parties to continue its work. "When we are able to attract other organizations, we're able to form productive partnerships," said Hardy.

FRLT recently joined with the Truckee Donner Land Trust, the Sierra Business Council, The Trust for Public Land and The Nature Conservancy to form the Northern Sierra Partnership.

Alliances such as the NSP help the trust to diversify its funding and remain viable, especially in light of the current economic situation.

As for future restoration projects, Hardy envisions partnering with the Feather River Coordinated Resource Management group more.

And in keeping with the theme of connecting people to places, the land trust will continue working with the Mountain Maidu, "harnessing the longtime relationship and deep knowledge of place the Maidu have for the land," said Hardy.

"If our work is to last, it must engage the hearts and minds of our community, creating a shared vision for the future," concluded Hardy.

