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Flora, fauna, rural tradition are preserved

# What bonds bought

County spent most of \$68M on 7 ranches and a farm

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Tucson Citizen

Most of the \$68 million spent on open space under a 2004 bond program has bought ranch or farm property in Pima County.

In what has been a hot real estate market, an incentive offered to ranchers and farmers has lowered the price of land that might have otherwise been too expensive for the county.

The county allows ranchers and farmers continued use of the land while stopping further development, a goal of the county's Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan.

The deals have helped Pima County protect important plants and wildlife and preserve a ranching tradition dating back to the area's settlement, officials say. The county has spent a little under half of the \$164 million approved for open space purchases in the May 2004 bond election.

Of that, \$50 million has bought land on seven ranches and a farm, property that makes up 92 percent of the land acquired under the bond program.

But some environmentalists say the ranch deals have come with another cost: cattle grazing, which is destroying some of the species intended for protection.

"We would like to see them preserve open space that doesn't have harmful land uses," said [Greta Anderson, range restoration coordinator at the Center for Biological Diversity](#). "Preserving open space, with the highest integrity, should be a priority for Pima County."

While not spelled out in the 2004 bond ordinance, ranch conservation was endorsed as part of the county's Desert Conservation Plan by the Board of Supervisors in 1999.

Two years later, the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection said in a report that grazing leads to "significant harm" to "natural resources ranging from riparian areas to living soil to vulnerable species."

The report cited a 1991 University of Arizona Press book on vegetation: "Probably no single land use has had greater effect on the vegetation of southeastern Arizona or has led to more changes in the landscape than livestock grazing. ..." County officials haven't seen the damage from grazing that critics claim, County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry said. The county requires environmentally sensitive land practices in its agreements with ranchers, he said.

Smaller properties closer to Tucson also cost more than the ranches, he said. That's why he's opposed to buying three of the four properties the Board of Supervisors will consider Jan. 16.

Only one of the four Northwest Side properties is reasonably priced, he said. Owners of the four properties, covering 42 acres near La Cholla Boulevard and Overton Road, want a combined \$4.6 million, or \$2 million more than county appraisals say they're worth.

The properties are sought in part because of the likelihood they're used by vulnerable species including the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl. The owl's previous status as endangered led the county to create the Desert Conservation Plan. Environmentalists such as Carolyn Campbell of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection worry about a shortage of open-space purchases on the rapidly growing Northwest Side.

But Huckelberry, a strong ranch supporter, says he wants to stay with the approach of buying more ranches and other large properties in outlying parts of the county.

"Isolated, small properties have less conservation value than larger properties," Huckelberry said. "The larger properties have less urban encroachment and contain more habitats."

Ranchers have a strong incentive to sell to the county. Southern Arizona's drought has reduced the number of cattle the land can maintain and reduced profits. Most ranches operate by the slimmest of margins, officials say.

In 2005, Jon Rowley considered options for two family ranches outside Arivaca, Rancho Seco and Santa Lucia. His father, who had managed the ranches after buying them in the 1950s, had recently died.

The drought had forced the Rowleys to reduce cattle production by half.

But Rowley, a former newspaper executive, didn't want to give up the ranching lifestyle. He had fallen in love with the land.

So the Rowleys sold the ranches to the county for \$18 million in a deal that gives the family use of the land for at least 10 years. Owners of four other ranches and Buckelew Farms have similar management agreements with the county.

The county manages two other ranches bought with bond money, A-7 and Canoa Ranch, but only the former still has cattle. The county spends \$270,000 a year on ranch management.

"It was a good deal," Rowley said. "It was a good deal for both parties."