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By [Melissa Flores](#)

Conservation easement keeps lettuce land from development

As development spreads to rural and agricultural areas in Santa Clara County, the Silicon Valley Land Conservancy has completed a \$2.1 million deal that will keep a 510-acre agricultural area from being paved over.

"It's a 1,100-acre agricultural preserve that will remain as ag forever," said Craige Edgerton, the executive director of the SVLC. "No one is ever going to build on that."

The Silicon Valley Land Conservancy helped to buy the development rights on Taylor Ranch in the form of a conservation easement.

"We buy the development rights, but the farmer continues farming," Edgerton said.

Land sold to developers generally nets more money than it would if sold for other agricultural uses, so the organizations like the SVLC pay the difference for development rights. For instance if a plot of land would sell for \$1 million as agricultural land, a developer might pay \$1.5 million for it.

Other conservation easements include habitat conservation easements, which protect endangered species or critical habitat.

Since 2002, the conservancy has helped acquire land and development rights on other farmland in the area. The Taylor Ranch purchase is the second of two agricultural easements south of Gilroy in recent years that bring the agriculture preserved space between the Carnadero Creek and Highway 101 to just over 1,000 acres.

Edgerton cited several reasons agricultural easements are important.

"One is to provide fresh, local fruits and vegetables," Edgerton said. "We eat the stuff that is grown there." The area also maintains the SVLC mission of keeping open spaces.

"As people drive down Highway 101 south of Gilroy, they will know that this open space will remain just that - open," said Don Gralnek, co-chairman of the conservancy.

The location of Taylor Ranch offers some side benefits as well.

"It will offer flood protection for Watsonville and communities downstream," Edgerton said. "It's not really the purpose, but it certainly helped."

The Carnadero and Llagas creeks run through the property, before connecting with the Pajaro River, recently named as the most endangered river in America.

The Wang Ranch, a 480-acre property was purchased in Sept. 2004 with funding from the OSA, Santa Clara Valley Water District, the Nature Conservancy and SVLC.

The two properties form the Carnadero Preserve and a spokesperson for OSA said the space would help protect the Pajaro River watershed, preserve riparian habitat and aid in maintaining agriculture in Santa Clara Valley.

The Santa Clara County Open Space Authority contributed \$500,000 to the Taylor Ranch easement, while both the California Department of Conservation and the U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service gave \$820,000.

The ranch is owned by Bruce Taylor, CEO of Taylor Farms, based in Salinas. The company sells hundreds of millions of dollars in bagged salads each year to restaurants such as McDonald's and Burger King. The company will maintain ownership of the property.

"The conservation easement on the Taylor Ranch solidifies the Authority's efforts to preserve agricultural lands in Santa Clara County," said Patrick Congdon, the general manager of the OSA. "The cooperative efforts of our four agencies demonstrate the importance of partnerships and what can be accomplished if you work collectively."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.