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Another look at Conaway Ranch

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I had a discussion at Starbucks Coffee Shop in Woodland on July 8 with Supervisor Mariko Yamada. On Sunday, July 10, I read her Op-ed in the Davis Enterprise titled "Straight talk about Conaway" co-authored with Helen Thomson.

In my Friday discussion with Supervisor Yamada I had said I was from Colusa County but was born and raised in Woodland and grew up on the Conaway Ranch where my family had farmed from 1935 through 1957. Also, I had been an appraiser in several eminent domain suits in Colusa County involving takings for the Tehama Colusa Canal by the Bureau of Reclamation.

I expressed my opposition to what the Yolo County Supervisors were attempting to do to the Conaway Ranch and that a jury trial to set the price could result in a generous award and a serious setback to the County. I was flabbergasted as to her unbending attitude and sharp response. In departing her comment was "See you in Court."

In 1935 Conaway was owned by the Birch Oil Company and Dan Conners was the manager. Later, Dad and I farmed on the Conaway until management was taken over by Heidrick Brothers in 1956.

As for "Whom do I trust with the future of the Conaway Ranch?" It certainly is not the supervisors and the Joint Powers Authority.

The 15-year track record of the owners and management of the Conaway Ranch is exemplary as to agricultural practices and wildlife management. This has been recorded in numerous publications and in reports from legitimate organizations in print and on the Internet. All of the Bypass lands have flowage rights owned by the State with limits of no levees or structures over 3 feet in height. The two sections north of the railroad are the settling basin for Cache Creek prior to overflow entering the Bypass and impossible to develop. A very significant portion of the ranch is in a flood zone plus the Williamson Act covers much of the ranch.

From my vantage point the county supervisors are executing a plain old "land grab," not for the protection of the assets, but to try to squeeze some type of financial leverage in the hope of fattening the county treasury down the line. Unfortunately, they have no money, and an ultimate cost to the county in legal fees, court fees, appraisal fees, a jury awarded price which might exceed \$100 million plus interest for the three to five years of litigation could be very expensive.

The authors stated that "On short notice" the property was put up for bid. Bear in mind that the owners were in bankruptcy and terms of their bankruptcy were overseen by the courts with the need for a quick sale.

Contrary to the inference that Steve Gidaro is only a "land speculator," he was a previous owner in 1990 and for the past 15 years has overseen the wildlife habitat activities on the ranch which are considered a model by university and wildlife experts throughout the nation.

Not addressed anywhere is the price paid for the ranch. The key to any appraisal of real estate as to fair market value is "The highest price estimated in terms of money which the property will bring when the property is exposed for sale in the open market by a willing seller, allowing time to find a willing buyer, neither the buyer or seller acting under compulsion, both having full knowledge of all the uses and purposes to which the property is adapted and for which it is capable of being used."

I see the generosity with the Rumsey tribe in sharing their planning and good fortune. In this respect I differ from some in the community. I do not think there was any quid pro quo regarding the golf course issue, as I am sure the tribe could have gone ahead and bypassed county approvals. Their feelings no doubt extend to the Conaway Ranch. I am sure the tribe has a long history of activities on this land in decades past. However, they are not a part of the eminent domain lawsuit and have only offered to assist in funding if the supervisors prevail in this case.

Court proceedings, as noted are set for Aug. 23. What is not being touted is how important this "right to take" court hearing is. Make no mistake, a favorable judgment will throw the present owners off the ranch immediately. Legally, the county might even terminate all management, employees, tenants (after harvest of current crops) and the hunters. The county will have full control.

One of the mysteries about this is the reluctance of certain prominent framers to take a stand on this land grab by supervisors. On the other hand, if you were one of the 20 farmer/tenants now on the Conaway Ranch, would you take the chance of getting on the wrong side of these supervisors?

Concerned citizens need to attend informational meetings, talk to their neighbors and write letters including newspapers, county organizations and the supervisors. Do not expect responses from the supervisors, as they are laying low and hiding behind "litigation secrecy" and hoping to skate by until after the Aug. 23 court hearing. Organizations such as the Farm Bureau and the Taxpayers Association should immediately seek to become witnesses in the upcoming court hearing with an arsenal of solid facts for the court.

The past eminent domain litigation for Pioneer School, the tentative eminent domain action by Esparto schools, this Conaway issue and the trend nationwide against property ownership rights capped by the recent Supreme Court decision bodes ominously for our future.

- Howard R. Plank is a Williams resident and the Plank family owns property in Yolo County.