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## Yolo County Drops Its Eminent Domain Bid to Acquire Conaway Ranch

By Eric Bailey  
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SACRAMENTO — Ending a contentious eminent domain battle, a small Northern California county has dropped its bid to forcefully acquire a sprawling ranch in order to preserve it.

Yolo County officials said Friday that they agreed to settle a long-running legal battle with the development group that owns the vast Conaway Ranch after receiving significant concessions to ensure that the land and its water supply would not be squandered.

The 17,300-acre ranch, just across the Sacramento River from the state Capitol, has for years been devoted to agriculture and wildlife habitat, a pastoral island in one of California's fastest growing regions.

Its purchase last year by a group of developers sparked concern that Conaway could sprout houses and have its water sold off to Southern California or some other thirsty area.

County officials said they wanted to acquire the ranch so they could preserve its farm fields and wetlands, popular with duck hunters. They also sought to ensure that the water remained on the ranch for farming and that any surplus would be slated for use in Yolo County, not sold to the highest bidder.

Over the last year, Conaway Ranch became a rallying cry for eminent-domain reform advocates, who eventually pushed a measure onto the November ballot. Proposition 90 would bar local governments from condemning private property to promote other private uses.

In an initial courtroom skirmish over Conaway last year, the county won the right to purchase the ranch. But more recent rulings went against the county, which faced the prospect of paying far more than officials felt Conaway Ranch was worth, said county Supervisor Mike McGowan.

The landowners, the Conaway Preservation Group, reportedly paid about \$60 million for the property a little more than a year ago. But McGowan said that in recent weeks the county's legal team concluded that a jury might set a price above \$100 million.

"It was going to be significantly higher than we wanted to pay," McGowan said. "We were looking at a situation where we couldn't afford to win."

The developers vowed throughout the battle that, rather than build houses, they would profit from continued farming and by marketing permanently protected easements to other builders wanting to offset the environmental damage of other big developments.

A spokesman for the group did not return a call for comment. The two sides finalized an agreement earlier this week that requires an evaluation of how much of the ranch's water rights are needed to maintain the historic level of agricultural production. The landowners can sell surplus water, but they must pay Yolo County 7.5%

above the purchase price if the water is shipped out of the county.

McGowan said the agreement also lets the property owners sell up to 1,500 acres near Interstate 5 that is deemed unsuitable for farming. The land must be sold in chunks of less than 250 acres or the county has the first right to negotiate for it. The landowners will also pay the county's \$2.4-million legal bill.

"This deal protects what's most important to us," McGowan said. "All along, the fundamental interest we've had is protection of the water rights on the ranch."

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