

Developer's lawsuit threatens local beef ranch

From Stephanie Mandel-Austin

I'm glad winter has arrived, because I cook more. Busying myself in a warm kitchen on a cold evening is much more attractive than cooking in the heat of a Penn Valley summer. The only glitch can happen when my partner Steve starts the woodstove fire early, before I've begun in the kitchen. On those days, I'm tempted to grab a project — work-related, a magazine, or a jigsaw puzzle — and take up my position in front of the stove for the remainder of the evening, with only brief forays into the colder regions to heat up something quick to eat.

Last weekend I was treated to a dinner cooked by Anna and Bill Trabucco at their newly-completed house off Bitney Springs Road. Anna and Bill lease land to rancher Jim Gates of Nevada County Free Range Beef, and were celebrating Jim's long-awaited new label, recently approved by the US Department of Agriculture and that now adorns his packages of ground beef in BriarPatch's freezer.

The party atmosphere was somewhat dampened, however, by talk of the lawsuit now looming over the Trabuccos and Jim. It seems that property rights are pitted against property rights in this case. In 2001 the Trabuccos took action to keep their land in productive ranching and farming use forever, donating 300+ acres to a conservation easement with Nevada County Land Trust. Theirs is the largest piece of land in Nevada County conserved in this way to date, setting an example for other owners of large tracts of agricultural land. This type of easement restricts future residential subdivision.

The lawsuit filed against the Trabuccos, by a developer, intends to secure him a right-of-way across the ranch to an undeveloped property he recently acquired. The Trabuccos and Gates contend that the proposed road would be "catastrophic to the continued protection of the conservation values and the success of the agricultural operation of Linden Lea" (the Trabuccos' ranch)," Anna says. "Under current zoning, the Garfinkel property could be split into four parcels, which, if developed, would impose a typical 30 to 40 car trips per day through the heart of protected habitat and a working cattle ranch...there seems to be a lack of understanding that agricultural land is now too precious to be so imposed upon, and that we put Linden Lea under conservation easement precisely to protect wildlife habitat and sustainable agricultural production, rather than to realize profits from residential development."

The lawsuit is costing the Trabuccos and Nevada County Land Trust tens of thousands of dollars. It directly threatens the viability of Nevada County Free Range Beef, BriarPatch's source of locally-raised hamburger and our planned source of fresh beef for the new store. Concerned BriarPatch shoppers can help save our local beef by donating to the Land Trust's legal defense fund. Send your tax-deductible contribution to: Nevada County Land Trust, 175 Joerschke Drive, Suite R, Grass Valley, 95945.