

The Mercury News

LA HONDA — For the past 175 years, it's been a Mexican land grant, a dairy farm, a hideout for members of Jesse James' outlaw gang, an oil field, a redwood logging mill, a cattle ranch and a retreat for heirs to the Weyerhaeuser lumber and Folgers coffee fortunes.

Now, this scenic 6,142-acre expanse in rural San Mateo County — with stunning views of the Pacific Ocean — will finally be opened to the public.



On Friday, the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District will open six miles of trails for hikers and horseback riders through the La Honda Creek Open Space Preserve, which stretches for five miles from Skyline Boulevard to La Honda.

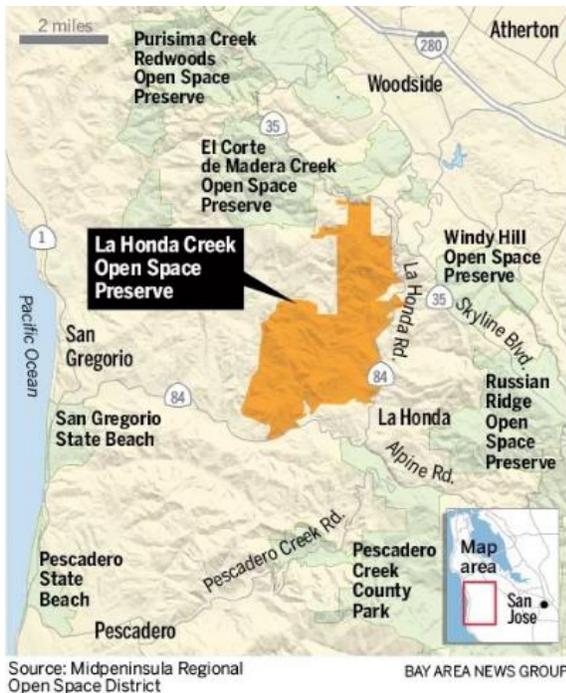
“You can go from the crest of the Santa Cruz Mountains halfway down to the ocean, from wonderful redwoods to grasslands,” said Steve Abbors, general manager of the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, a government agency based in Los Altos. “It’s like a small national park. It’s just beautiful.”

The preserve — which is three times the size of the UC Santa Cruz campus and home to red-tail hawks, bobcats, deer and other wildlife — will be open every day from sunrise to sunset, free of charge, like the other 25 preserves that the open space district operates across 63,000 acres in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. Starting Friday morning, it will be accessible through a gate just north of the town of La Honda at 900 Sears Ranch Road. There’s also a new parking lot, restrooms and interpretive signs.

The opening is a watershed event for the agency and Bay Area lovers of the outdoors.

Over the years, the open space district, which is funded by property taxes, has come under criticism for buying land but keeping roughly half its holdings closed to the public. La Honda Creek, its largest open space preserve in San Mateo County, was one of the most prominent that was padlocked, with only a few miles of trails open for hikers and horseback riders who had to apply to the district for special permits to gain access.

Although the district established the preserve in 1984 when it bought a 255-acre property, it grew dramatically in size in 2006 when the agency bought the 3,681-acre Driscoll Ranch. That property, a working cattle ranch that had been owned by Rudy Driscoll Jr. and other heirs to the Weyerhaeuser timber fortune, had been zoned for up to 100 homes.



“You could have had one house per 20 acres or so, on average,” said Lennie Roberts, a legislative advocate with Committee for Green Foothills, a Palo Alto environmental group. “They would have been pretty monstrous ‘look at me’ houses. Every one of them would have had roads, a well and septic systems. Ranchettes all over the place. Now everyone will be able to enjoy it.”

Last month, the district opened the summit of Mount Umunhum, a former Air Force radar station south of San Jose, after years of toxic cleanup and renovation. Similarly, plans for La Honda Creek were completed in 2012. However, Abbors said, the district did not have the money to implement them until voters in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties approved Measure AA, a \$300 million bond act in 2014 aimed at creating more open space.

“Purchasing it was one thing,” he said. “We did a plan, but we didn’t have the funding to open it. We promised the public that if they voted for Measure AA, we’d open it. We’ve now added staff who can run it, and we’ve put in the improvements.”

Over the next 20 years, the district plans to do more work at the preserve, building up to 30 miles of trails for hiking, mountain biking and horseback riding, along with new parking areas and possibly an education center at the landmark red barn, visible from Highway 84 north of La Honda.

The property’s history is rich. Originally part of a Mexican land grant in the 1830s called Rancho San Gregorio, the property was sold to various owners after California became a state in 1850, and it was used as a hideout in the late 1860s by the notorious outlaws Cole Younger and John Jarret, as well as a group of friends who came west to La Honda to hide out from the law. The men were members of the famed Jesse James gang, which robbed trains, banks and stagecoaches across the West.

For decades, the property was split into four different ranches and used for dairy farms, beef cattle and logging for roof shingles. Decades ago, one of them was owned by Peter Folger, the grandson of James Folger, who came to San Francisco in 1850 and founded the coffee company that bears his name instead of traveling to the Sierra to pan for gold. **The Driscoll family bought the land in 1968 and sold it in 2002 for \$21 million to the Peninsula Open Space Trust, a Palo Alto environmental group that sold it to the open space district four years later for a reduced price of \$9 million.**

As a condition of that 2002 sale, Driscoll negotiated a 50-year grazing lease on the property for his black angus beef cattle. But Driscoll, who also ran a popular annual rodeo on the southern edge of the ranch until about five years ago, gradually moved out of the cattle business and gave up the lease. He died in 2015 at his home in Woodside.



About 215 beef cattle remain on the property. They are owned by two ranchers who pay rent to the open space district, Markegard Family Grass-Fed beef in Half Moon Bay and Agco Hay, a San Benito County company.

District officials say the cows help keep down invasive plants like star thistle and reduce fire risk. Their presence also helps avoid political conflicts with other rural landowners in the area who are wary of government agencies buying land and taking it out of agricultural production.

“We’re pleased that, as these properties get preserved, that active agriculture and ranching continues,” said Jess Brown, executive director of the San Mateo County Farm Bureau. “Hikers and cattle can co-exist. Just let the cattle be. Don’t bug them. They aren’t aggressive.”

<http://bayareane.ws/2ilGy4f>