Conaway Ranch preserved

By **LEN RICHARDSON**

THE Yolo County board of supervisors has announced a settlement agreement with the Conaway Preservation Group regarding Conaway Ranch.

"On behalf of the Yolo County board of supervisors, I am very pleased to announce an agreement has been reached that addresses our long-standing objectives to preserve the water, agricultural heritage and natural resources of Conaway Ranch for public benefit," says Chairman Frank Sieferman Jr. "This agreement brings to a successful conclusion what all parties said they wanted: protecting a critical resource in Yolo County."

The litigation settlement provides the following requirements:

■ Water shall be used first to satisfy any and all uses on the Conaway Ranch, including agriculture, open space, recreation and habitat.

■ No water can be sold off the ranch unless it is determined to be surplus above and beyond the current uses on the ranch, including agriculture, recreation and habitat.

■ In-county surplus water transfers/sales require county notice and input.

■ Out-of-county long-term surplus water transfers/sales (more than one year) require the county to be given the first right to negotiate for the purchase of water and the county to receive 7.5% of long-term water transfers.

■ Out-of-county short-term surplus water transfers/sales (less than one year) require the county to be given the first right to negotiate for the purchase of water and the county to receive 2% of net proceeds derived from short-term water transfers, or the fee adopted as part of the water ordinance, whichever is larger.

■ Any groundwater extraction on Conaway Ranch shall be consistent with the groundwater management plan.

■ The Conaway Preservation Group will consult with the county on public access to specific areas of the ranch.

■ CPG may sell or grant conservation easements on all or part of the ranch.

■ The Yolo County board of supervisors will have the first right to negotiate with CPG in any future purchase of all or part of the ranch. Small parcels may be sold without prior notification to the county. No more than a total of 1,500 acres of small parcels may be sold. All parcels sold remain subject to county land-use policy regulation.

■ CPG shall reimburse the county for its attorneys' expenses in the amount of $2.4 million.

Important role in Yolo County

Conaway Ranch encompasses more than 17,300 acres of active farmland, open space and wildlife habitat along the Sacramento River. In addition to Yolo County's largest natural-gas fields, about 50,000 acre-feet of surface-water rights go with the land. The ranch plays an important role in flood control and rural recreation.

In the spring of 2004, the ranch was put up for sale by National Energy and Gas Transmission in a closed-bidding process not legally open to the county.

Key Points

■ Water shall be used first to satisfy all uses on the Conaway Ranch.

■ Only 1,500 acres of small parcels of the ranch may be sold.

■ The Conaway Preservation Group will return $2.4 million to county.

After efforts to negotiate with NEGT were denied, and with the private bidding about to close, the board of supervisors voted unanimously on July 8, 2004, to pursue eminent domain to preserve Conaway Ranch for public benefit. In December 2004, after eminent domain proceedings were initiated, CPG purchased the ranch.

In November 2005, Yolo County Superior Court Judge Timothy Fall ruled Yolo County had the legal right to acquire Conaway Ranch for public benefit. The valuation trial was scheduled for Oct. 31, 2006. Settlement talks resulted in an agreement on the preservation of the ranch.

RANCH VICTORY: Conaway Ranch is home to Yolo County's largest natural-gas fields, and about 50,000 acre-feet of surface-water rights go with the land.