

The rancher and the salamander

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Pact protects way of life and endangered species

BY KIM LAMB GREGORY /// PHOTO BY DANIEL DREIFUSS

Nobody on the Campbell Ranches in Lompoc has ever seen a California tiger salamander. But the presence of the elusive lizard-like creatures on land the Campbells have farmed for more than a century landed them on one side of a negotiating table facing representatives from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and The Land Trust for Santa Barbara County.



“It was probably not the most comfortable meeting for them,” said Kari Campbell-Bohard, Campbell Ranches chief financial officer. “We were not necessarily the most friendly people.”

“I had to convince them to trust me, but as the meeting went on and on, there were daggers coming at us from the Campbells,” said Rachel Henry, habitat conservation plan coordinator for Fish and Wildlife in Ventura.

Tense though it was, that first meeting in 2017 led to an agreement that broke new ground in Santa Barbara County and produced a deal that benefited both the Campbells and the salamander.

In March, the Land Trust finalized the purchase of a 118-acre conservation easement on the Campbell Ranches after the California Department of Fish and Wildlife earmarked nearly \$2 million of state conservation funding to compensate the Campbells.

The agreement conserves a portion of the land for the federally endangered tiger salamander, but the Campbells still own the land and their cattle still can graze on the easement.

“People think the salamander less important because it’s small, but it is a top predator and keeps everything below it in check,” Henry said of the 6- to 8-inch amphibians. “It is a small crucial link in the ecological web of life.”

Bob Campbell, 70, is a fourth-generation rancher. He and his wife, Gerry, work the land with Campbell-Bohard, 50, and their other daughters, Kendra Grossini, 47, and Karlie Kirkland, 43. The eight grandchildren are growing up and working on the ranch.

A match made in Lompoc



The senior Campbell’s great grandfather Veril Campbell arrived in Lompoc from Oregon, met Gertrude “Gertie” Rice of Santa Maria and married her in 1925. Four years later, they purchased 600 acres that would eventually grow into the roughly 3,000 acres the family holds today.

“They grew dry beans and grains and had a small dairy herd that expanded as the years went by,” Bob Campbell said.

Today Campbell Ranches runs beef cattle and grows row crops such as broccoli, cauliflower, beans, cabbage, celery and romaine lettuce. A berry grower leases a parcel of Campbell land.

The conflict began in 2000, when the tiger salamander was listed as endangered. There is a roughly two-acre seasonal pond on the Campbell property that fills in the winter. The salamanders are born underwater in these vernal pools then migrate on land and live underground — usually in a squirrel burrow, dining on insects.

Campbell said he was told by U.S. Fish and Wildlife he could not plant water-intensive crops, such as berries or grapes, on a section of his property or it would violate the Endangered Species Act.

“They were threatening enforcement. They were impossible to work with,” Campbell said.

“Approaching the Campbells with an understanding of their point of view goes a long way,” Henry said. “My predecessors did not approach it that way, and at my first meeting with the Campbells, there was still a lot of that history in play.”

The Santa Barbara Land Trust also wanted to find a win-win solution.

“We’re about the land and the people who live on it,” said Land Trust Conservation Director Bruce Reitherman. “It’s not just about a particular scenic view or just preserving land for agriculture. It’s all those things combined.”

In that spirit of cooperation, Henry and the Land Trust came up with a “crazy plan,” Henry said, in which Campbell would apply for a federal “incidental take permit,” which allows the holder to engage in a legal activity that might accidentally harm an endangered species.

The permit opened the door for federal compensation to landowners in exchange for their property.

There were delays, but in March Henry called and told Campbell they were fully funded.

“Holy mackerel!” Campbell said.

The \$2 million agreement marks the beginning of a phased effort in which the Santa Barbara Land Trust eventually will acquire an easement right on additional Campbell land, 460 acres in all. In return, the federal government agrees to pony up \$7.8 million more.

Henry said this agreement — a first for her office and in Santa Barbara County — is one she hopes to use as a template for future conservation deals.

“It’s important they compensate private property owners,” Campbell said. “I think conservation is a great thing, but like most laws and movements it’s gone too far. ... My family’s been here for 100 years and I’d like to be here for another 100 so there’s no incentive for me to destroy it.”

Kim Lamb Gregory, a communication specialist at Cal State Channel Islands, is a veteran print and broadcast journalist.