

# San Francisco public utility acquires Wool Ranch property in Milpitas

 [mercurynews.com/2020/02/10/san-francisco-public-utility-acquires-wool-ranch-property-in-milpitas](https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/02/10/san-francisco-public-utility-acquires-wool-ranch-property-in-milpitas)

By Jeremiah  
Oetting

February 10,  
2020



The San Francisco Public Utilities Commission recently purchased nearly 800 acres of verdant, rolling hills and expansive bay area views east of Milpitas, a property known as Wool Ranch, adding cohesion to its collection of protected lands that surround the watershed feeding the Calaveras Reservoir.

The \$9.7 million acquisition follows the completion of the new Calaveras Dam in May 2019, an earthquake-resistant improvement on its predecessor, which was built in 1925. As water in the reservoir inches back toward its maximum capacity of 31 billion gallons, officials from SFPUC say that protecting the lands of the upper-watershed safeguards water quality and provides refuge for wildlife, including several rare or endangered species.

“We moved pretty quickly,” said Carla Schultheis, the program manager for the environmental improvement projects on the watershed. “It was a great opportunity for us to buy a piece of property that was in the watershed so close to Calaveras.”

The Calaveras Dam is the largest of five Bay Area reservoirs that contribute to the Hetch Hetchy system. While most of the Bay Area's water comes from the Sierra Nevada snowmelt stored in the Hetch Hetchy reservoir in Yosemite National Park, the remaining 15% is sourced at these local reservoirs, contributing to the drinking water in Alameda, Santa Clara and San Mateo counties.

The original Calaveras Dam was built within a thousand feet of the Calaveras fault line. When the 76-year-old dam was found vulnerable to major earthquakes during an inspection in 2001, officials were forced to reduce the reservoir to 40% of its maximum volume to ensure the safety of nearby communities, which would be leveled in the event of a catastrophic failure.

Constructing a new, safer dam was the largest of the 87 projects included in the Water Systems Improvement Project, a \$4.8 billion initiative that was approved by voters in 2002. The dam cost \$823 million and took nearly eight years to complete, four years longer than initial estimates, and more than double the cost. When construction began, the water level in the dam was reduced even further, to 20% of its capacity.

Now, the water level in the Calaveras Reservoir is rising, currently at 63% of its maximum capacity — enough water to provide 60,000 Bay Area families with a year's supply of water. Unlike the San Antonio Reservoir to the north, which is partially fed with water from Hetch Hetchy, Calaveras relies exclusively on the rain run-off funneled into the reservoir by the Arroyo Hondo and a diversion dam on the Alameda Creek.

The newest land from the Wool Ranch purchase is part of the more than 38,000 acres that SFPUC owns, adding to the 40% of lands surrounding watersheds that are protected from development by a nonprofit or government agency.

"We're really close to the urban fringe, and this area could be developed, and that's really something we don't want to see in the watershed," said Schultheis. "Once you start having houses and cars and all that, we just lose the control we have over water quality."

Citing those concerns, Schultheis said that though a public utility owns the land, it won't be accessible for public use.

"We want to protect the watershed, and it's a really vast watershed," she said. "Having the resources to patrol the area would be pretty daunting."

Keeping the land closed to the public might have some benefits, especially for the wildlife that frequents the ranch and surrounding areas.

"If you name it, it's here!" said Clayton Koopmann, the rangeland manager for the watershed. He rifles off a number of species he's seen in the area: California red-legged frogs, western pond turtles, Alameda whip snakes, Bay checkerspot butterflies, even a

resident herd of Tule elk. The largest nesting habitat for golden eagles in the U.S. is just north at the San Antonio Reservoir, and three known bald eagles nests make their home near Wool Ranch.

“From a species standpoint, it’s a really unique and diverse area,” he said. However, a single animal seems to predominate the lands surrounding Wool Ranch — cows. While none are currently grazing on the newly acquired property, grazing allotments are expected in the future.

“They’re our employees,” laughs Pat Jones, who said the cows reduce fire risk by consuming a lot of the grasses that act as fast-burning fuel.

Jones is the watershed keeper, the “eyes and ears” of the watershed, as he describes it. He’s done the job for eight years, patrolling the roads to ensure there isn’t poaching or illegal dumping. Recently, he spent an afternoon chasing cows off the narrow and winding Calaveras Road. Every once in a while, a misguided semi-truck driver will get stuck on one of the road’s hairpin turns.

Today, Calaveras Road is free of cows. Jones pulls over to take in the scenery, pointing out a bald eagle’s nest and various other landmarks around the dam. The shimmering water of Calaveras Reservoir stretches below, flanked on one end by the scarred land around the newly constructed dam — the only reminder of the 2.7 million thirsty customers and the sprawling metropolis just beyond the hills.

---