

Grant will make local ranch visitor-friendly destination

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A Contra Costa conservation group has landed a \$1.9 million state grant to open public access to the Fernandez Ranch property between Martinez and Hercules, as well as restore an eroded creek there, officials announced Thursday.

The Martinez-based Muir Heritage Land will use \$900,000 of the money on improvements for visitors to enter and use the open space, starting in 2010.

The group will build an entrance parking lot for cars and horse trails, a bridge across Rodeo Creek, 3.5 miles of trails and four picnic areas.

The Muir land trust bought the ranch property south of Highway 4 in 2005 for \$3.2 million after an extensive campaign to solicit public donations and secure government grants.

"This grant really will allow us to open up Fernandez Ranch," said Linus Eukel, executive director of the nonprofit conservation group. "Fernandez Ranch is the land trust's most regionally and nationally significant project to date."

Part of the San Francisco Bay Ridge trail crosses the property.

About \$1 million of the state grant will be used to add native plants and repair environmental damage along Rodeo Creek.

The state grant was awarded by the California Resources Agency out of its state rivers and parkway program.

The land trust plans to involve members of the East Bay Conservation Corps, students in the Martinez Unified School District environmental studies academy and local community volunteers in the work on the land.

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