

Office of the President

TO MEMBERS OF THE ACADEMIC AND STUDENT AFFAIRS COMMITTEE:

ACTION ITEM

For Meeting of November 13, 2024

**DESIGNATION OF THE STRATHEARN RANCH RESERVE (SAN BENITO COUNTY)
INTO THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA NATURAL RESERVE SYSTEM**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This action item requests the Regents designate the 42nd reserve within the University of California’s Natural Reserve System (UCNRS) as the “Strathearn Ranch Reserve” (Strathearn Ranch or Reserve). Consisting of 2,700 acres of real property located at Tres Pinos, San Benito County, California, Strathearn Ranch is a bequest under the Lee Von Hasseln Living Trust (the “Living Trust”) that requires the Regents to establish the Strathearn Ranch Reserve as a separate reserve under the UCNRS within 12 months after the donor’s death, which occurred in January 2024.

Strathearn Ranch contains ecologically significant habitat and species and provides an excellent location for teaching and research. UC Santa Cruz campus will have day-to-day responsibility for the Reserve, while the UCNRS systemwide office will administer the Reserve under UCNRS guidelines. The Reserve will receive full funding in perpetuity based on an estimated \$4 million to 7 million gift that will be used to create an endowment to ensure the financial viability of the Reserve, providing funds for staffing and operational costs. The combined value of the real estate and other assets is approximately \$7 million to \$8 million. The Reserve’s unique habitat, species diversity, and proximity to the UCSC make it an ideal location to advance the UCNRS mission of university-level teaching, research, and public service at protected natural areas throughout California.

RECOMMENDATION

The President of the University recommends that the Academic and Student Affairs Committee recommend that the Regents designate the Strathearn Ranch property as the 42nd component of the Natural Reserve System (UCNRS) to be administered by the UCNRS systemwide office and operated by UC Santa Cruz with a \$4 million to \$7 million gift that will be used to fund an endowment.

BACKGROUND

In terms of its size, ecological diversity, and user base, the Natural Reserve System (UCNRS), founded in 1965, is the world’s largest university-managed network of natural areas, with 41

field stations encompassing 47,000 acres that are fully UC-owned and which provide UC researchers and students access to an additional 1.5 million acres of partnership lands (e.g., the National Park Service, the U.S. Forest Service, California State Parks, and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management). At its core, the UCNRS provides a unique opportunity to conduct field research, educate students, engage the public, and conserve California's biodiversity. UCNRS reserves are available not only to students, educators, and researchers from the University, but to qualified non-UC users in science, art, the humanities, teaching, and other disciplines.

In 2013, UCSC submitted a proposal to the UCNRS to establish a new 2,700-acre reserve comprised of land containing chaparral, sycamore woodland, oak forest, and grassland habitat. The property is located within approximately 60 miles of UCSC and is situated in lowlands flanked on three sides by ridges covered in coastal scrub, oak woodland, native and non-native grasslands, bare areas, riparian habitat, and rocky outcrops. Native fauna associated with open country habitats, such as the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*), western meadowlark (*Sturnella neglecta*), coyote (*Canis latrans*), mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), California ground squirrel (*Otospermophilus beecheyi*), and mountain lion (*Puma concolor*) are commonly observed on the Property. These types of oak savanna and grassland habitats, which characterize the majority of Strathearn Ranch, used to cover an enormous area encircling the Central Valley of California.

The 2,700-acre site represents a tremendous natural resource for Californians through its size, its diversity, and its supported biodiversity, some of which are considered threatened species by both the federal and State governments. Furthermore, the Reserve is a critical site for tribal collaboration and the opportunity to provide increased tribal access. Strathearn Ranch is situated in a mosaic of relatively undeveloped rangelands that likely allows for significant individual exchange among species surrounding the property and those on the Reserve. Thus, effective stewardship of the Reserve likely will have broad geographic impacts on sensitive species management, as the immediate threat of development on site and adjacent to the property is low. Taken together, these features highlight the substantial value of the property in the context of biological conservation.

Pursuant to established procedures, UCSC and UCNRS conducted a multi-stage review process that included determinations by a Campus Advisory Committee, a Three-Campus Review Committee, and the University-wide UCNRS Advisory Committee to determine the viability of a new reserve. Each reviewing committee enthusiastically supported UCSC's proposal to create the Strathearn Ranch Reserve.

UCSC has ensured the financial viability of the Reserve by conducting a cost estimate for staffing and maintenance. An endowment of approximately \$4 million to \$7 million dollars will support on-site staffing and operational needs.

Programmatic Purpose

Global climate change over the past 100 years has been associated with flora and fauna range shifts in a series of high-profile research projects in California. Much of this work has focused on

the Sierra Nevada, yet the potential for a decrease in water availability in the Central Valley and Coast Ranges could have consequences for plant and animal communities as far as the Mediterranean. A network of oak savannah sites spanning several UCNRS reserves represents the possibility of conducting replicated observational and manipulative experiments on some of California's most iconic biotic communities. Both monitoring and experimentation will provide the foundation for scientific research that will help anticipate and mitigate the effect of global climate change on extant biota. Strathearn Ranch's location, further south and east of Hastings and Blue Oak, means that it is warmer and drier than both of those other oak woodland/savannahs and may provide clues as to how higher temperatures and lower water availability will affect oak woodlands further north.

The local context of grazing and the land history of the Strathearn Ranch site present the opportunity for research and curriculum to be developed around topics associated with coupled human-natural systems. The long history of humans modifying the landscape in California and the likely direction that management of the lands will take upon acceptance into the UCNRS present an opportunity to engage scholars regarding practical applications and local management dynamics.

The Strathearn Ranch site has significant UC teaching value. University classes could easily make day trips to the Ranch; however, the Ranch also offers very suitable overnight opportunities as well. Each year, the UC Santa Cruz reserves host more courses and research projects from both UC Santa Cruz and numerous other universities, and each year demand exceeds the ability to accommodate all activities. Therefore, Strathearn Ranch's availability and close proximity to Santa Cruz and the Bay Area would be beneficial for UC Santa Cruz students and researchers as well as other users. This is especially true in the context of UC Santa Cruz's commitment to providing hands-on transformative experiences for their students. In addition to UC use, the Reserve would likely have high educational value for the K-12 schools and community college districts, along with the general public from the Hollister and Gilroy communities.

Funding and Feasibility

Campus Funding Commitment

The estimated \$4 million to \$7 million gift, which will be used to create an endowment will support on-the-ground staffing and operational needs. The Santa Cruz campus will provide support to cover administrative, financial, and human resources needs.

Systemwide Funding Commitment

When resources become available, the UCNRS provides temporary, one-time health and safety funding for each of its managing campuses. In addition, the UCNRS systemwide staff provides reserves with in-kind professional support services.

Endowment Funding Sources

Under the terms of the Living Trust, once the Reserve is created, the University will receive assets estimated at \$4 million to \$7 million, which will be used to create an endowment. This endowment will generate an annual payout of approximately \$178,000 to \$311,500, which would be used to support staffing and operational needs.

Timeline

Under the donor’s Living Trust, the property must be designated as the Strathearn Ranch Reserve by January 2024, at the anniversary of the donor’s death. In May 2024, President Drake conditionally approved acceptance of distributions from the Living Trust to the Regents pursuant to his delegated authority to accept gifts over \$10 million. UCSC is conducting full due diligence on the property and, upon Regents’ approval of the Reserve designation, University staff will inform the trustee’s counsel of the Reserve designation so that it can begin the process of conveying the University’s interest in the real property to The Regents, which is expected to occur no later than 2025.

Environmental Impact Summary

The proposed action involves a change in ownership of the Ranch and is categorically exempt pursuant to California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines Section 15325 (Class 25) as the transfer will preserve Natural Conditions and will preserve open space and habitat.

The proposed action is also Generally Exempt from CEQA’s environmental review requirements pursuant to CEQA Guideline 15061(b)(3), because it can be seen with certainty that the proposed action has no potential for causing a significant effect on the environment and, therefore, is not an activity subject to CEQA.

KEY TO ACRONYMS

CEQA	California Environmental Quality Act
UCNRS	University of California Natural Reserve System

ATTACHMENTS:

1. [Three-Campus Committee Report – Strathearn Ranch Reserve](#)