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After 55 years of stewardship, local rancher loses lease

Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District says lease renewal process was highly competitive

By Holly Rusch, Daily Journal staff
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Vince Fontana’s family have been stewards of coastal, agricultural land in the Half Moon Bay area for more than 100 years. And as the property changed owners, he’s remained a ranching tenant for the last 55 years — until now.

Fontana, a sixth-generation rancher, was not selected for lease renewal by the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, the current owner of land on the Purisima Creek Redwoods Preserve that comprises around 50% of Fontana’s ranching business.

He believes the reason he lost the lease on the land — the lobitos grazing unit — has much to do with his pushback against Midpen’s policies over the years.

“It was very disappointing for me to realize that everything that we’ve done the last 100 years just basically got put aside because of political and bureaucratic issues with the district,” he said. “It put me in a very uncomfortable position, but yet, I feel it’s mandatory that I do what I can to protect agriculture on the coast and the future cattlemen.”

Midpen Public Affairs Specialist Leigh Ann Gessner couldn’t offer specifics on the lease renewal ranking process for the property, which she said was highly competitive, with six applicants, including Fontana. The new tenant recommended for the lease is Willow Creek Land and Cattle.

“Every single proposer was subjected to the same criteria and the same review process, and it was simply a competitive process,” she said.

Criteria utilized in the ranking process included experience, capacity, history, knowledge and an alignment with natural resource management. Special consideration is given to local San Mateo County operators and current on-site tenants, with both an oral interview and on-site visit conducted, Gessner said.

When asked if Fontana wasn’t awarded a lease renewal for any specific reason, Gessner said she didn’t think so, but noted that renters sign contracts to lease the properties and are clearly aware of when they will expire. Four other leases were also up for renewal this year, she said, though the incumbent tenants all retained their properties.

“I think Vince is a wonderful rancher, and I think it was a competitive process, and that’s how the rankings ended up from that competitive process,” she said.

Fontana said that he, also, was offered no specific reason by Midpen that he couldn’t remain ranching on the land, but that he didn’t even make it to the oral interview phase of the process.

“Up to this point in time, I have not had one reason why I should not have this lease back. The fact is, after five to 50 years of stewardship on a piece of land, you feel very uncomfortable when you’re asked to fill out some papers and a questionnaire,” he said. “What can you tell them they don’t know about you already?”

Midpen expanded its land conservation goals to the San Mateo County coast in 2004, taking over ownership of the property from the Peninsula Open Space District, Fontana said.

On the coastside, Midpen has preserved 19,000 acres of public land for recreation, restoration of the natural environment and agricultural use through its conservation grazing program. A great majority of Midpen’s acreage on the coast, around 15,500 acres, is included in that conservation grazing program, which aims to allow for natural management of coastal grasslands, Gessner said.

Midpen and the agricultural community on the coast have a shared goal of preserving the land, she maintained, noting that the agency has fought development pressures and has protected around one-third of remaining coastside ranchland.

“I think there’s a mutually beneficial partnership there, and obviously it’s public land and not private land,” she said. “So there’s a little bit of compromise that has to happen, because we need to make sure that we’re managing the public lands that are supported by public dollars responsibly.”

But San Mateo County Farm Bureau President BJ Burns said that since Midpen’s expansion to the coastside, they haven’t lived up to the promises they’ve made to the farming community around the protection and preservation of agriculture.

“They sold us a bag of goods, [that] they’re going to protect agriculture, that’s the least they’ve done. They do very little,” he said. “All they want is to get their foot in the door, and now you’re fighting a big entity of money and people.”

For Fontana, tension with Midpen has spawned from multiple avenues, he said, including wildlife fencing and suggestions on invasive weeds.

But the majority of tension, in his recollection, has stemmed from conflict between his desire to protect livestock from predators like mountain lions and MidPen’s conservation grazing policies, which attempt to include ecological and conservation measures.

One element of that is promised reimbursement for cattle loss in exchange for ranchers adhering to Midpen’s no-kill policy of predators on their lands, which Fontana said has not been adequately fulfilled and cost him thousands of dollars in livestock.

“All we’re asking for is support, where we’re at now. What that has done is created problems with me, with the district, as far as being vocal and standing up for my business, trying to protect my business,” he said.

Fontana referenced a 2018 killing of a mountain lion on one of the properties he leases as a potential point of particular conflict. Gessner said she didn’t have knowledge of the specific incident, but that it would not have been taken into account during the leasing process.

While other local ranchers have also had issues with Midpen’s management policies over the years, they’re fearful of discussing it lest they also lose their leases, Burns said.

“There’s a lot of the ranchers that are leasing from Midpen that feel the same way, but they are scared to talk. They’re scared to speak up because they’ll lose their lease, and some of them have got leases coming up in another 2 1/2 years,” he said.

Fontana has been hopeful that he’ll pass along the family ranching business to his grandson, Hunter Fontana. And despite the challenges that the Fontana family and agricultural industry at large is facing, Hunter, too, is hopeful he’ll be able to remain a rancher.

“Sitting here and seeing where everything is going today, that we’re losing more and more young folks growing up that aren’t pursuing agriculture, it feels almost as a duty to me to follow in my grandfather’s footsteps and continue his legacy,” Hunter Fontana said.

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