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After 55 years of stewardship, local rancher loses lease

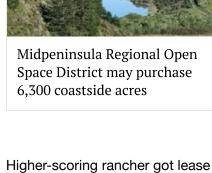
Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District says lease renewal process was highly competitive

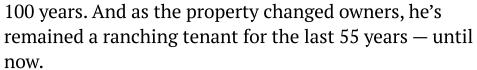
By Holly Rusch, Daily Journal staff

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From the Daily Journal archives







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

in a very uncomfortable position, but yet, I feel it's

process for the property, which she said was highly

and the same review process, and it was simply a

Land and Cattle.

Vince Fontana's family have been stewards of coastal,

agricultural land in the Half Moon Bay area for more than

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

competitive, with six applicants, including Fontana. The new tenant recommended for the lease is Willow Creek

"Every single proposer was subjected to the same criteria

bureaucratic issues with the district," he said. "It put me

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

When asked if Fontana wasn't awarded a lease renewal for any specific reason, Gessner said she didn't think so,

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

interview and on-site visit conducted, Gessner said.

but noted that renters sign contracts to lease the

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.

said.

they don't know about you already?"

"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

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

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.

dollars responsibly."

preservation of agriculture.

suggestions on invasive weeds.

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

But San Mateo County Farm Bureau President BJ Burns said that since <u>Midpen's expansion to the coastside</u>, they

haven't lived up to the promises they've made to the

farming community around the protection and

Midpen and the agricultural community on the coast have

a shared goal of preserving the land, she maintained,

"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

But the majority of tension, in his recollection, has stemmed from conflict between his desire to protect

multiple avenues, he said, including wildlife fencing and

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

knowledge of the specific incident, but that it would not have been taken into account during the leasing process.

one of the properties he leases as a potential point of

particular conflict. Gessner said she didn't have

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.

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

"There's a lot of the ranchers that are leasing from

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

"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

hopeful he'll be able to remain a rancher.

to me to follow in my grandfather's footsteps and continue his legacy," Hunter Fontana said. holly@smdailyjournal.com

Holly Rusch, Daily Journal staff

(650) 344-5200 ext. 105

Daily Journal staff