



Dairy cattle graze on spring growth on the Historic A Ranch with Drakes Bay in the background at the Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

Point Reyes National Seashore ranchers in talks with The Nature Conservancy amid fight over their private leases

JOHN BECK AND MARY CALLAHAN

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

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One of the world's largest land conservation groups has stepped into the battle between environmentalists and local ranchers over the future of private cattle and dairy ranching in Point Reyes National Seashore, The Press Democrat has learned.

The secret-until-now role of The Nature Conservancy in mediating between ranchers who have been part of the North Bay economy for generations and environmental groups who say ranching operations harm the park's wildlife and waterways could reshape life on the scenic 71,000-acre peninsula, where, in an unusual arrangement, tule elk graze on some of the same grass as dairy cows and cattle on federally protected land.

Those concerned include Albert Straus, CEO of [Straus Family Creamery](#), which buys about 15% of its milk from the Mendoza and Nunes dairies in Point Reyes. Straus himself is not directly involved in settlement talks, which are being conducted under confidentiality agreements.

“We just found out a few weeks ago that The Nature Conservancy is working with the park to remove all the ranches and dairies out of Point Reyes, to buy out their leases,” Straus said.



The Kehoe Ranch on the north end of the Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

Citing sources involved, Straus said [The Nature Conservancy](#) required all Point Reyes ranchers to sign nondisclosure agreements, in addition to the standard mediation gag order, “which is totally contrary to the public interest,” he said.

But others say The Nature Conservancy is aiming to bring the warring factions together, aiming to resolve fundamental differences among environmental groups, local ranchers and park officials.

The Press Democrat

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“The Nature Conservancy was invited by all of the litigating parties to join the mediation, with the intention of helping to secure a long-term resolution,” said court-appointed case mediator Bradley O’Brien in a statement to The Press Democrat Monday. “TNC is voluntarily participating in the mediation and is not a party to the litigation.”

The seashore’s storied dairy and cattle ranches, many of them third and fourth-generation family farms that predate the creating of the park, have been around for more than a century.

They have been mired for the past two years in a federal lawsuit brought against the seashore by the Marin-based Resource Renewal Institute, and two national groups, Center for Biological Diversity and Western Watersheds Project. More than a dozen dairy and cattle ranchers have intervened on the park’s side.

Stuck in mediation and settlement negotiations, the case is the latest of several protracted legal and political tests of the seashore’s founding principle more than 50 years ago: that a vast and mostly wild landscape transferred into public ownership should still accommodate its ranching tradition.

“This is not the Serengeti. This is an urban fringe park where we can demonstrate really thoughtful land stewardship if we all work together.”

— Bill Niman

Bound by the strict confidentiality of mediation, most Point Reyes ranchers would not comment or did not return calls this week and last week. Rancher Bob McClure declined to comment and jokingly quoted his Tomales High School Spanish teacher Annie Rook, saying, “En boca cerrada no entran moscas” — “In a closed mouth, no flies will enter.”



Dairy cows are herded across Sir Francis Drake Blvd. for milking at the Mendoza Family Dairy, or Historic B Ranch, located in the Point Reyes National Seashore, Monday, April 1, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

Others close to negotiations warn that it's too early to rush to judgment.

"I would caution people not to speculate about ongoing confidential settlement negotiations," said North Coast Rep. Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, who has been an outspoken supporter of the national seashore's ranching traditions. "It's always tempting for folks to engage in the intrigue and speculation from outside of the room. But there's a reason why there's confidentiality around settlement negotiations, and unless and until we have a deal, everything else is conjecture."

Lifeline for struggling dairies?

Bodega Bay

Tomales

Dillon Beach

1

 **Beef and dairy ranches**

 **Point Reyes National Seashore**

Tomales Point Tule Elk Reserve

Kehoe Dairy

McClure Ranch

Pierce Point Rd

Marshall



2 miles

Pacific Ocean

Sir Francis Drake Blvd

Inverness

Point Reyes Station

1

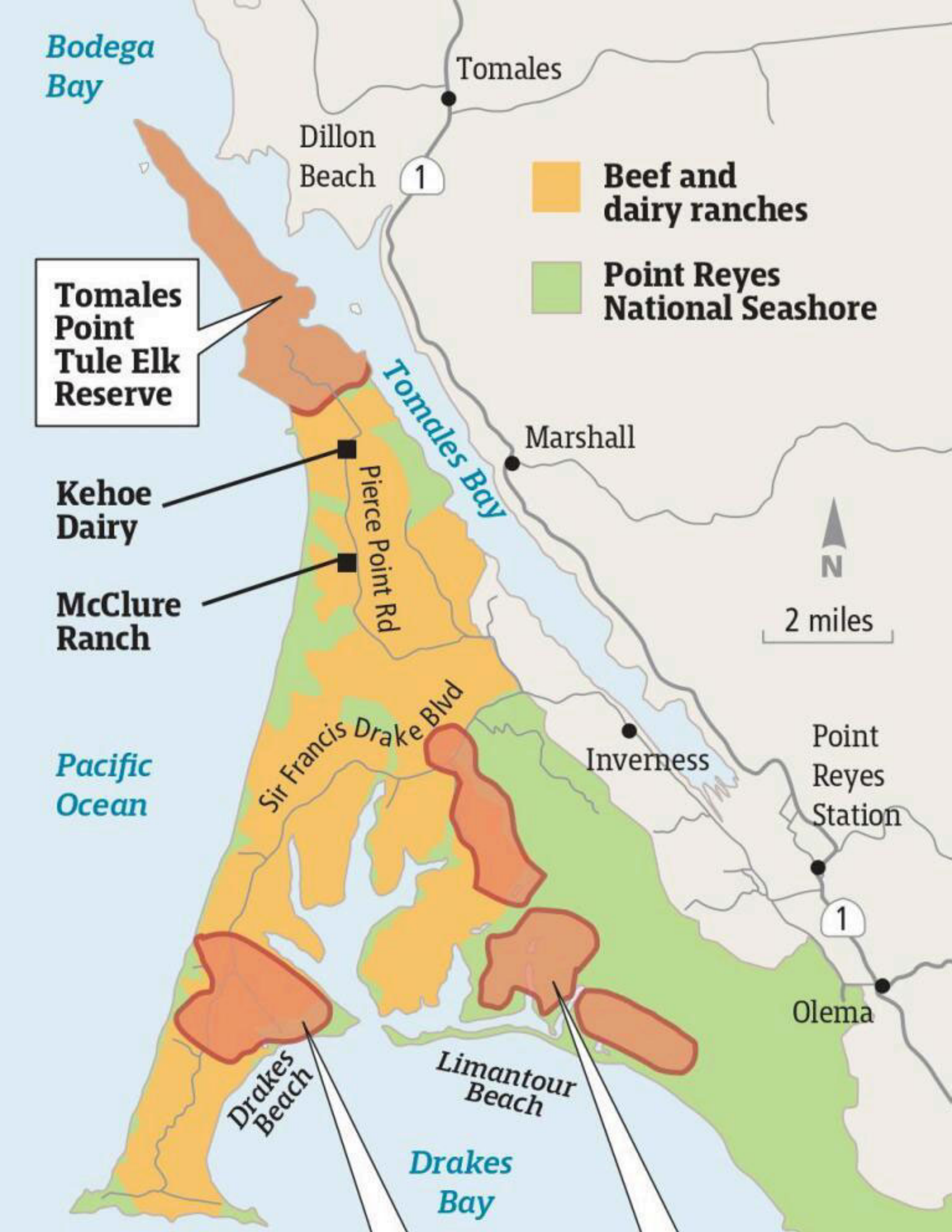
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Tomales Bay



Point
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This map shows the tule elk reserve and nearby ranches on Tomales Point in the Point Reyes National Seashore. (Dennis Bolt/For The Press Democrat)

Point Reyes National Seashore administers 21 ranching operations run by about 20 families both inside the 71,000-acre seashore and on surrounding National Park Service lands in the north district of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

All of the ranches, which spread across a total of 26,000 acres, are governed by the same general management plan challenged in the 2022 lawsuit. All but two families are part of the settlement talks.

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Bill Niman, who runs beef cattle on 800 acres in the southern end of Point Reyes National Seashore, learned of the conservancy's involvement this week.

"I would hope The Nature Conservancy would have a better understanding of the ecosystem than the people who filed the lawsuit," he said.

The owner of natural meat company Niman Ranch sold his land to the federal government in 1984 for a "life estate" or lifetime lease, instead of the 25-year or 30-year leases many original dairy farmers signed when the park was formed, starting in the early 1960s. Niman is not a part of any current park lawsuits, which means he's not bound by any nondisclosure agreements.

Before Press Democrat reporters called Tuesday, he was unaware of The Nature Conservancy's involvement.

The seashore's mixed land-use model is so unique that no other location in the country overseen by the National Park Service, with the exception of an Ohio park, allows working ranches within its boundaries.

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The organization's portfolio could prove a match with Point Reyes. It owns 500,000 acres of U.S. grazing lands and collaborates with working ranches around the country.



Black tail deer forage in tall grass at the McClure Ranch at Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

"I'm hopeful that someone at The Nature Conservancy will be visionary enough to say, 'This is a unique situation. This is not the Serengeti. This is an urban fringe park where we can demonstrate really thoughtful land stewardship if we all work together,'" Niman said.

But he's also worried that the four remaining dairy ranches — Kehoe, Nunes, Mendoza and Spaletta — might not last much longer, given the wider economic, environmental and operational headwinds facing local dairies.

"I think it's an opportunity being lost here if we don't try and integrate the pastoral grazing operations. The dairies are a separate issue maybe, but they're going anyway because they can't afford to do business here," he said. "But the grazing operations, I think it would be really unfortunate to buy them out, restrict them and get them off the land in terms of having something return to some imaginary natural state out here, which would be complete open grasslands with thousands of herbivores grazing it. That's the natural state that it was."



Tule elk trot to a new grazing area at the Tule Elk Reserve, located on Pierce Point of the Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. Tomales Bay can be seen, middle, with the Mayacamas Mountains (including snow capped Cobb Mountain) in the distance. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

Frayed bonds among farm and environmental interests


Straus, a longtime Marin County dairy farmer who in 2021 moved operations to Rohnert Park, is spearheading Save Marin's Food Community, a coalition created to support continued ranching on the seashore as a vital part of west Marin County's agricultural industry.

CEO Albert Straus at Straus Family Creamery in Marshall, California on Thursday, March 28, 2019. (Ramin Rahimian for The Press Democrat)

The group's website cites the emergence of a nonspecific "regional threat" to food production on Point Reyes, and says loss of the parkland's ranches would prove devastating to the community's food system, economy and schools. Its members include farmers, dairy industry advocates, food producers like Petaluma-based [Amy's Kitchen](#) and organizations such as the Western Organic Dairy Producers Alliance and the Agricultural Institute of Marin.

"We're trying to say to the park service," Straus said, "that if they're willing to go outside the mediation to work with other groups (like The Nature Conservancy), then they should allow the ranchers to work with agencies that are there to support them and help them prove their businesses and worth, while they negotiate their 20-year leases."

The leasing of the land was a crucial provision when the national seashore was signed into law during the John F. Kennedy administration in 1962 and established in 1972. Point Reyes ranchers sold their land to the federal government with agreements they would be able to lease back their properties.

 President John F. Kennedy lifts a pen from a rack on his office desk as he signs a bill Sept. 13, 1962, creating a national seashore area on Point Reyes, a rugged triangular-shaped peninsula which juts into the Pacific Ocean 35 miles northwest of San Francisco, California. (AP Photo/hlg)

President John F. Kennedy lifts a pen from a rack on his office desk as he signs a bill Sept. 13, 1962, creating a national seashore area on Point Reyes, a rugged triangular-shaped peninsula which juts into the Pacific Ocean 35 miles northwest of San Francisco, California. (AP Photo/hlg)

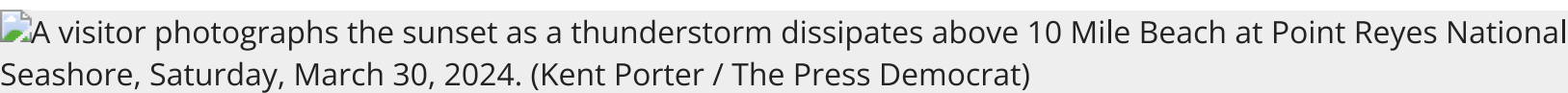
At that time, ranchers and environmentalists were banding together to save the remote, wind-swept point from encroaching real estate development and suburban sprawl.

But more than 50 years later, many bonds between ranchers and environmentalists have dissolved.

The most prominent example from the seashore was not a cattle or dairy ranch but an oyster farm, the last of those once in the seashore.

Its owner, firebrand rancher Kevin Lunny, a decade ago lost his contentious bid to renew an expiring lease on a 2,500-acre estuary at the heart of the park. The federal government and a wide array of environmental groups held fast to long-standing plans to turn Drakes Estero back to wilderness, while Lunny's allies in food and farming circles called for the preservation of a prized local food producer.

The bruising fight, which roped in the Interior Secretary and U.S. Supreme Court, ended with the farm's 2014 closure and a \$4.5 million dollar cleanup of the estero, now a prime destination for kayakers and paddleboarders.


A visitor photographs the sunset as a thunderstorm dissipates above 10 Mile Beach at Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

A visitor photographs the sunset as a thunderstorm dissipates above 10 Mile Beach at Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

Two years later, a lawsuit challenging continued ranching on the parklands without a full analysis of its environmental impacts resulted in a settlement the next year requiring completion of an environmental impact statement and amendments to the seashore's four-decade-old management plan.

The new plan was ultimately approved in the fall of 2021 after a robust, four-year public process. Among its provisions was an allowance for ranching leases up to 20 years in duration. Ranchers had been operating under one-year leases before development of the new plan got underway but were granted interim five-year leases while it was considered.

Soon after the new plan was approved, however, the three original environmental plaintiffs — the Fairfax-based Resource Renewal Institute, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Western Watersheds Projects — filed a new federal suit citing years of evolving park policy that allowed for ranching on the seashore “without impairment of its natural values,” enabling “maximum protection, restoration and preservation of the natural environment.”


 Bull tule elk graze above the Mendoza Ranch at the Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

Bull tule elk graze above the Mendoza Ranch at the Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

The January 2022 suit cited water quality violations, surface and groundwater consumption, spread of invasive plant life and conflict with wildlife species including the park's iconic tule elk as "significant" harms to "environmental, scenic and recreational values."

The amended general management plan includes allowances for free-ranging tule elk to be shot and killed to maintain a population cap.

Ranchers operating under interim 5-year leases during the management plan update and environmental review were subsequently issued 2-year leases to see them through the next round of settlement talks. Those leases expire Sept. 14.

 After a winter of heavy rain, a bobcat relaxes in the sun at the Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)


After a winter of heavy rain, a bobcat relaxes in the sun at the Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

Short-term leases hobble ranchers

Ranchers, as they have all along, say the uncertainty around short-term leases makes it financially infeasible to invest in infrastructure improvements, much less adopt innovative, regenerative farming methods proposed by Straus, who claimed to be the first 100% organic dairy creamery in the country when he made the switch in 1994.

Moreover, they are obliged to make environmental improvements and demonstrate progress under a water quality strategy for management of ranching operations required of the park by the California Coastal Commission for ranches in the coastal zone and thus under the commission's jurisdiction. There's a Catch-22 in the need for investment without the promise they can stay.

"It's just a very difficult situation out there, because the ranchers don't have lease renewals, and they can't get the lease renewals until they can deal with the water quality issues, and they can't deal with the water quality issues because they don't have the money," said Caryl Hart, chair of the Coastal Commission and former director of Sonoma County Regional Parks.

A worker walks to feed dairy cattle on the Mendoza Ranch at the Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

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As a result, said Hart, who had been unaware of the The Nature Conservancy's entry into settlement talks, leaseholders might find relief in a buyout.

"We have been in complete limbo and uncertainty on these ranches for a decade and a half," said Kevin Lunny, who runs about 90 beef cattle on the fourth-generation Lunny Ranch and is an intervenor in the legal case.


Straus, after learning about The Nature Conservancy's involvement, held a Zoom meeting March 12 with Mike Sweeney, the organization's executive director of California, and Michael Bell, its protection strategy director.

"We asked them what their role was in the park since we were hearing they we were negotiating with the ranchers and dairies, and they acknowledged they're helping Point Reyes National Seashore, but they did not say specifically what they were negotiating," Straus said.

"I hope the outcome will be consistent with what the public agreed to in this process because it would seem to me to be wrong if that public process gets all undone."

During the half-hour meeting, Straus said he tried to convince The Nature Conservancy representatives that “there are all kinds of collaborations that could happen to help really build the model of dairy farming in the national seashore that is a model for the country and the world, around sustainability and working in harmony with nature,” he said. “The Nature Conservancy could work with the farmers, as they have around the state and the country and the world, to help our community rather than trying to remove them.”


The global nonprofit is involved in restorative, land-use projects in 79 countries around the world. Last year, it raised nearly \$875 million in private funding and membership dues, and spent more than \$976 million directly on conservation land and easements, [according to a 2023 financial summary on the TNC website.](#)

 Beef cattle graze in lush spring growth on the north end of the Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

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Its stake in ranch land is expanding, and a prime example of its collaboration with the federal government, ranchers, other private landowners and public land managers is the Heart Mountain Ranch Preserve, located 60 miles from Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, where elk, mule deer and antelope, share the plains with grazing cattle.

‘We are muzzled’

 A sign at the Kehoe Ranch on the north end of the Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)


A sign at the Kehoe Ranch on the north end of the Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

In Point Reyes, though, the intermingling of cattle and dairy operations with some wildlife populations, and especially, the seashore's tule elk, has been vexed.

Tim Kehoe, who runs Kehoe Dairy with his brothers Tom and Mike, did not return phone calls seeking comment about the mediation talks and The Nature Conservancy's role. His silence was an about-face from last October, when he described a controversial plan to remove fencing separating the tule elk preserve from ranches as a possible "nail in the coffin" for local dairies. In a recent text message, he would only say, "We are in the middle of the mediation, and it's not a good time to get into what is going on."

According to Straus, Kehoe Dairy has drastically reduced its herd, from more than 400 cows down to around 80 head.

Among the Point Reyes ranchers contacted, the most outspoken was Lunny, whose Drakes Bay Oyster Co. closed in 2014 after his bruising and unsuccessful bid to renew an expiring, 40-year mariculture permit in waters designated by Congress as marine wilderness.

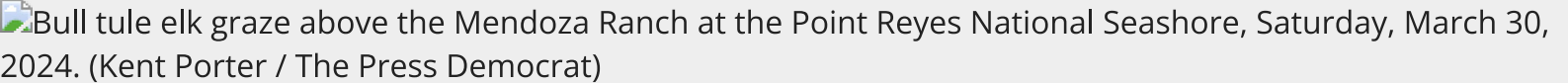
 Owner Kevin Lunny, joined by his wife, Nancy, gives an oyster toast during a gathering on the last day of retail sales at Drake's Bay Oyster Company near Inverness, on Thursday, July 31, 2014. (Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat)

Owner Kevin Lunny, joined by his wife, Nancy, gives an oyster toast during a gathering on the last day of retail sales at Drake's Bay Oyster Company near Inverness, on Thursday, July 31, 2014. (Beth Schlanker / The Press Democrat)

Though he declined to reveal anything about the confidential talks, he said he strongly disagreed with the secrecy surrounding the seashore's future, given the public process that had drawn input from thousands who weighed in on the amended general management plan.

"I wish I could talk about substance, but I'm not allowed to," he said. "I can tell you that we are muzzled, and we really do think there are things in the process that the public would be interested in."

"I hope the outcome will be consistent with what the public agreed to in this process because it would seem to me to be wrong if that public process gets all undone," Lunny said.


Bull tle elk graze above the Mendoza Ranch at the Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

Bull tle elk graze above the Mendoza Ranch at the Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

Public kept in dark

The Nature Conservancy already is engaged in a search for donors tied to its work in Point Reyes, according to Straus and others familiar with the group's work who asked to not to be named for fear of breaching the cloak of confidentiality around it.

Michael Bell, the protection strategy director, held a gathering of potential donors at a house party in Ross on March 14, meeting with well-heeled prospective donors who might help fund a Nature Conservancy buyout of rancher leases, according to Straus.

 A dairy cow at the L Ranch Co. located in the Point Reyes National Seashore, Monday, April 1, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

A dairy cow at the L Ranch Co. located in the Point Reyes National Seashore, Monday, April 1, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

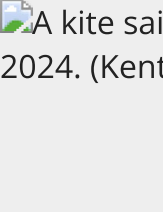
Later, at a March 27 meeting of the Committee on Housing Agriculture Workers and Their Families, a coalition of Marin County stakeholders, Straus brought up The Nature Conservancy's involvement in the mediation process to everyone in attendance at the National Park Service's Bear Valley Center.

He said he was interrupted by Melanie Gunn, the national seashore's spokesperson, and Marin Agricultural Land Trust Executive Director Lily Verdone, a former Nature Conservancy employee, who told him he was not allowed to talk about that information because "nondisclosure agreements are in place." Straus said he replied that he had not signed a nondisclosure agreement and thus was free to talk.

Gunn, in calls and emails this week and last week with The Press Democrat, declined to discuss developments in the mediation process, citing confidentiality, except to note that "Albert Straus is not a party to the confidential mediation discussions."

Verdone said she similarly wanted "to respect the confidential process of mediation," and had nothing to contribute.

The Nature Conservancy officials Sweeney and Bell referred inquiries to the mediator, Bradley O'Brien.

A kite sails on the breeze searching for prey at the Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

A kite sails on the breeze searching for prey at the Point Reyes National Seashore, Saturday, March 30, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

It remained unclear what role or stance the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria might have in recent developments. The tribe in 2021 entered into a 20-year, government-to-government partnership agreement with the National Park Service — the first in the nation — allowing it to focus on management issues involving designated Native American cultural properties and “to ensure Tribal views and traditional ecological knowledge are part of the management of tule elk and the ranching lands in PRNS,” the tribe said in a statement at the time.

Tribal Chair Greg Sarris was unavailable Tuesday to comment on revelations about The Nature Conservancy’s role in the settlement.

Straus, who is following in the footsteps of parents who were dairy ranchers in Marshall, and were instrumental in helping broker the original national seashore deal in the 1960s, said he is speaking out now because he doesn’t want to wait until all closed-room deals are done.

“Usually, the public finds out after the fact, and by then it’s too late.”

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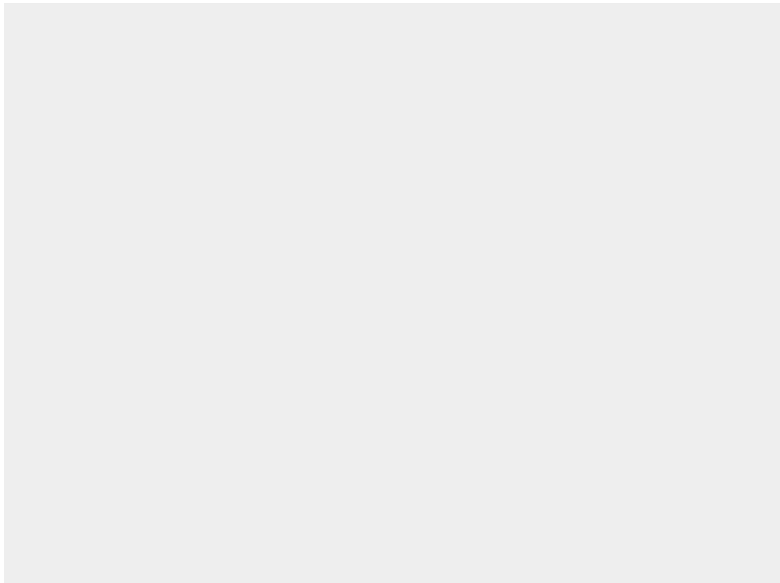
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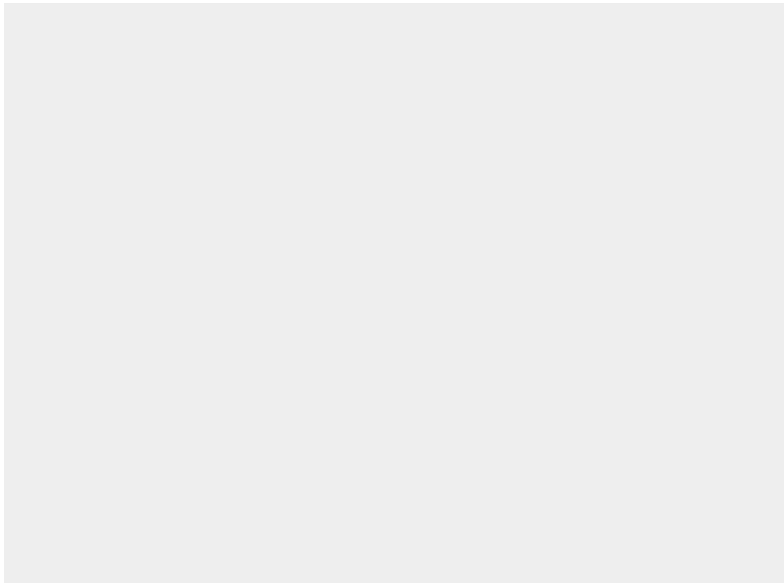
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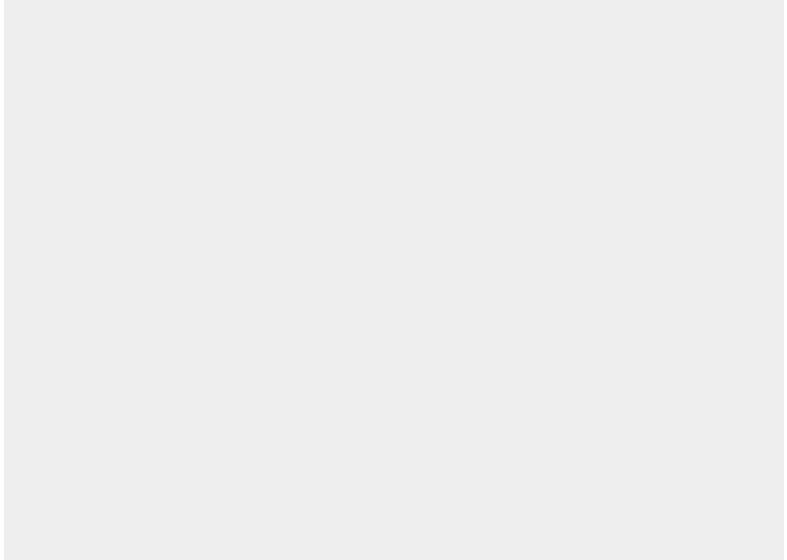
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