

Vasco Caves Regional Preserve is located in the Altamont Hills of south eastern Contra Costa County. The Souza Ranch Resource Enhancement Project expanded Vasco Caves Preserve through purchase of a 317-acre conservation easement. This project enhanced habitat values for special-status species, including California tiger salamander, red-legged frog, western burrowing owl and San Joaquin kit fox.

This project was initiated because William Lyon Homes is constructing the Vista Del Mar housing project in Pittsburg, which will impact about 105-acres of aestivation habitat for California tiger salamander and three locations for western burrowing owl.



Rehabilitated ponds will provide habitat for the California tiger salamander. Photo by Joe DiDonato.

A management plan was developed for the entire 617-acre Souza Ranch property. The plan calls for a five years of monitoring to be conducted by Lyon Homes. Following this period, the District will assume management, as funded through a \$798,080 perpetual endowment provided by Lyon Homes.

Lyon Homes rehabilitated two stockponds by installing erosion control devices to prevent pond failure. New boundary fences and gates were installed to secure and protect the property.

The previous year-round cattle grazing operation was changed to seasonal sheep grazing to avoid impacts in wetland areas, to establish native perennial grasses, to reduce fuel loads around the existing wind turbines and to enhance habitat for tiger salamanders and western burrowing owls.

Vasco Caves and surrounding areas contain suitable habitat for the species that will be impacted by the Vista del Mar housing project. Lyon Homes will provide \$1.5 million to purchase a conservation easement on a 317-acre portion of the Souza Ranch.

The District will also make improvements to Souza Ranch, including control of the non-native yellow starthistle and introduced non-native predators, including bull frogs and fish that would otherwise degrade protected habitats.

Quick Facts

Action: Land acquisition
Acres: 317
Funding: \$2,506,885
Provided by: William Lyon Homes
Construction: 2007
Target habitats: Riparian, grassland, ponds.
Target species: Ca. tiger salamander, burrowing owl.
Improvements: Rehabilitating two ponds, enhancing native vegetation and controlling non-native vegetation.



Red-legged frog is abundant at Vasco Caves.



Typical stock pond on Souza Ranch