



# VIEWS

QUARTERLY NEWS FROM THE MIDPENINSULA REGIONAL OPEN SPACE DISTRICT • WINTER 2021-22



A view from Sierra Azul Open Space Preserve by Weiping Wang.

## 50 to Forever

Celebrate 50 Years of Community Accomplishments with Midpen in 2022



In 2022, the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District invites you to join us in marking 50 years since our founding. It is a remarkable milestone of community foresight and continued shared values, and something to be celebrated. A journey to the summit of Mount Umunhum in Sierra Azul Open Space Preserve provides a wonderful vantage point for seeing the results of the first half-century of Midpen's work and how community needs have expanded our priorities over time.

Along the easy-access paths atop Mount Umunhum, you will find two awe-inspiring, but contrasting vistas. On clear days, the San Francisco Bay gleams to the northeast. It is ringed by hubs of innovation and industry, home to well over 7 million people. In nearly every other direction, the rugged panorama of the Santa Cruz Mountains is breathtaking, looking deceptively wild. These views encapsulate the story of how Midpen came to be.

In the late 1960s, Nonette Hanko was raising four young children when she became increasingly alarmed at how quickly the nearby open spaces were

being developed. She worried that children like her own would soon be left without the opportunity she had growing up to connect with nature.

Hanko began going to city council meetings and talking to everyone who would listen, including *Palo Alto Times* newspaper reporter Jay Thorwaldson who suggested she follow the East Bay's lead in creating a regional park district to protect the land. Soon, Hanko was hosting meetings in her living room with other concerned citizens. Together, they sparked a grassroots conservation initiative called "Room to Breathe" that culminated in the founding of Midpen in 1972 with the successful passage of Measure R by Santa Clara County voters. Since then, voters in San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties expanded Midpen's geographic boundaries to now include most of San Mateo County, including the Coastside from south of Pacifica to the San Mateo-Santa Cruz county line.

Sierra Azul Open Space Preserve now forms the southern tip of a 65,000-acre greenbelt of public open space land protected by Midpen that



stretches along the ridgeline above the cities and towns of Silicon Valley – a remarkable milestone that has only been possible through the efforts of an entire community coming together for a shared goal. Preservation alone, however, is only one step in supporting clean air and water, climate change resilience and healthy, biodiverse ecosystems throughout the region.

With a long history of human disturbance, the Santa Cruz Mountains and its ecological functions have been impacted over centuries. These lands have been logged and clear-cut, mined

and farmed, dammed and flooded, settled and abandoned. Much of the work that Midpen now does – through the hard work and dedication of staff, contractors, partners and community volunteers – is managing and restoring the natural resources. Midpen employs a broad, scientifically informed toolkit to restore natural ecological functions, maintain or increase native biodiversity and mitigate wildland fire risk. On Mount Umunhum, this meant literally moving mountains to restore the peak after it had been leveled to establish an Air Force base. Each native plant you see at the summit was planted by hand to return the native flora that had once flourished in this unique environment. In this way, Mount Umunhum epitomizes the story of how Midpen has evolved since the public agency was first founded.

Throughout 2022, there will be ample opportunities to commemorate past accomplishments, get excited about future projects and acknowledge everyone who helps bring Midpen's mission to fruition. We are planning a family event at Ravenswood Open Space Preserve in East Palo Alto, a community event at Johnston Ranch in Half Moon Bay and more.

For details follow @MidpenOpenSpace on social media, or sign up for our monthly email newsletter on [openspace.org](https://www.openspace.org).

## INSIDE THIS ISSUE



### Giving Nature a Helping Hand

Restoration efforts include helping wildlife safely cross the road, and making ecosystems more resilient to fire.

Robert M. Stronck



### Guided Activities Return

You can once again join Midpen's volunteer docent naturalists on the open space preserve trails this winter. Details inside.

Patty Riek



### Keeping the Coastside Rural

With the help of our partners, Midpen is protecting open space and agricultural land near Half Moon Bay.

Midpen



A docent naturalist-led hike at Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve by Lanette Otvos.

# Winter 2021-22 Guided Activities

## General Information and COVID-19 Protocols

With this newsletter in hand and a sense of exploration in mind, we invite you to enjoy the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District preserves. These 26 extraordinary preserves include many thousands of acres of permanently protected open space, from redwood forests to bay shoreline. All guided activities are developed and provided by docent naturalists who have completed an extensive training program. These docents volunteer their time to share enthusiasm and knowledge with you about natural and cultural history.

Here is a list of upcoming guided activities. Even more are available on our website. The activities are FREE and currently due to ongoing pandemic precautions ALL activities require online reservations and group sizes are limited. When making a reservation, activity participants will be asked to review and agree to Midpen's pandemic safety protocols to protect the health and safety of one another, volunteers and Midpen staff.

## Wonder and Wander

**Saturday, Dec. 4**

**Skyline Ridge**

**2 miles E F J B**

The rainy season brings out so many little wonders! Join environmental education staff Nina Vuoso and docents Jon Bianchi and Sarah Schoen this winter for a children-focused discovery walk on the trails around Alpine Pond. Get ready to get down and look around at nature from a child's view. This leisurely-paced activity is most appropriate for children aged 5 to 11 years and will occur in light or moderate rain, so please bring appropriate rain gear. At the end of this walk, you'll have the option to enjoy your own picnic at nearby tables.

## Literature, Lore and Life Sciences

**Saturday, Dec. 4**

**Long Ridge**

**4.6 miles M**

Would a rose by any other name smell as sweet? Unpack the diverse symbolic and scientific meanings behind this and other familiar quotes from literature across the centuries and continents on this moderately-paced hike along Peter's Creek and Long Ridge trails. Docents Anna Lee and Susan Bernhard will guide you on an exploration of the many ways nature has inspired literature and lore throughout history, and the various paths through which humans have made sense and meaning of nature in our lives.

## Epic Equus

**Tuesday, Dec. 7**

**Rancho San Antonio**

**14 miles B R**

View this preserve from the outside in with docent naturalist Teri Baron and an assistant trail patrol volunteer on the spectacular trails that circumnavigate Rancho San Antonio. You'll be riding your very own equus up, up, up and down, down, down, and all around for this epic ride. You know you have always wanted to do this!

## Fungal Fun

**Sunday, Dec. 12, Long Ridge, 4 miles**

**Sunday, Jan. 9, Purisima Creek**

**Redwoods, 7 miles**

**S B**

If you have not discovered the variety of fungi along trails in the rainy season, then join docent naturalists for these two leisurely- to moderately-paced stop-and-go walks.

## Signs of Winter

**Monday, Dec. 13**

**Tuesday, Jan. 18**

**Pulgas Ridge**

**4 miles M**

Enjoy a morning hike with docent naturalists to explore for signs that winter has arrived. Watch for dusky-footed woodrat nests and trees displaying berries and nuts along the Blue Oak and Dick Bishop trails. You'll climb hills with elevation gain of over 600 feet to take in ridgetop views on this moderately-paced round-trip outing.

## First Day of Winter

**Tuesday, Dec. 21**

**El Corte de Madera Creek**

**5 miles M B**

Share the first day of winter on this moderately-paced hike with docent naturalists Catherine Crawford-Swent, Ann McCarty and Marie Faust Evitt to observe seasonal transitions and explore nature's life cycles. Discover plant strategies for survival and learn how mature plants evolve and change. While deep in the forest on the Sierra Moreno, Oljon and Steam Donkey trails you'll encounter ferns, Douglas fir and redwood trees. Perhaps you'll also discover corollaries with transitions in your own life.

## Earthquake Walk

**Sunday, Jan. 2**

**Los Trancos**

**2 miles E F**

Join docent naturalists Paul Billig and Dave Boore for a fun and educational hike along the San Andreas Fault. You'll stop to discuss the wonder of plate tectonics, examine remnants left by thousands of major earthquakes, and learn how to prepare for future earthquakes. **(Note: Families with engaged children who are attentive listeners and capable of hiking several miles are welcome on this leisurely-paced outing with minimal elevation change.)**

## Explorer Hike: Winter Waterfowl

**Wednesday, Jan. 5**

**Stevens Creek Shoreline Nature Area**

**4 miles E B**

Embark on a birding expedition with docent naturalists Kate Gudmundson, Dennis Smith, Laura Levin and Mary Brunkhorst. You'll enjoy the salt air and bay views as you leisurely walk the Bay, Levee and Stevens Creek trails looking for feathered friends from near and far.

## Reservations Required for all Guided Activities at [openspace.org/events](https://openspace.org/events)

Reservations will open and be accepted online two weeks in advance of the activity date. No walk-up participation allowed. Additional activity guidelines are available on the website – please be sure to review the information to ensure your experience is enjoyable.

## Legend

- E** Easy Hike/Walk: Flat to gently rolling hills. Total elevation gain less than 200 feet. Leisurely pace. Frequent stops.
- M** Moderate Hike: Steeper or more frequent uphill grades. Total elevation gain 200 to 600 feet. Leisurely to moderate pace.
- S** Strenuous Hike: Steep hills and/or long distances. Total elevation gain greater than 600 feet. Moderate to vigorous pace.
- F** Family Friendly: Suitable for children; must be accompanied and supervised by an adult. See the activity description for any additional information.
- J** Stroller Accessible: Jogger-type suggested.
- B** Meal/Snack Break: Bring a lunch, dinner, or snack as appropriate.
- R** Equestrian Ride: Riders under age 18 must wear a helmet. Lead lines are required and breast collars are recommended for horses. Equestrians must provide their own horses (no stallions).
- W** Wheelchair Accessible.

## Activity Times

Check the website for the time of each guided activity. The activity durations listed are averages based on our experience – always allow extra time in your schedule for unusual circumstances, or the slower pace of some groups. Please arrive a little early to ensure a prompt start for each activity.



Birdwatching in the baylands by Ellie Van Houtte.

## Bird Watching at the Bay

**Saturday, Jan. 8**

**Stevens Creek Shoreline Nature Area**

**3 miles E F**

Winter days are ideal for seeing lots of birds in the baylands. Some birds are quite similar looking and can be hard to identify. Your docent naturalists, Bill and Marilyn Bauriedel, will demystify bird identification focusing on field marks and behaviors on this leisurely walk. A spotting scope, used with social distancing guidelines, will provide you a closer view. Bring your own binoculars if you have them. Beginning birders and children older than 6 are welcome.

## All Preserves Great & Small

**Friday, Jan. 14, Sierra Azul, 7.4 miles**

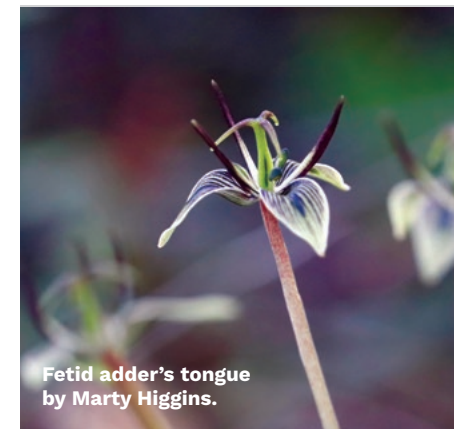
**Sunday, Jan. 23, Ravenswood, 3 miles**

**Friday, Feb. 11, Thornewood, 3.5 miles**

**Sunday, Feb. 20, Picchetti Ranch, 3 miles**

**E**

To celebrate Midpen's 50th Anniversary in 2022, docent naturalists are offering the "All 26 Challenge", a hike series to visit all 26 Midpen preserves. Join one of these guided experiences to explore what makes each preserve a special place to visit. More offerings coming your way throughout the year!



Fetid adder's tongue by Marty Higgins.

## Explorer Hike: Wildflower Treasure Hunt

**Wednesday, Feb. 2**

**Thornewood**

**4 miles E B**

Experience the delight of discovering early spring wildflowers with docent naturalists Laura Levin, Dennis Smith and Mary Brunkhorst. Descending through chaparral into redwood forest at a leisurely pace, you'll travel along the Schilling Lake and Bridle trails, losing and then gaining 400 feet of elevation on this leisurely-paced out-and-back hike. If seasonal timing allows, you'll be treated to a blooming display of fetid adder's tongue near your shaded creekside lunch spot.



Pond reflection by Nikki Weidner.

## Signs of Spring

**Tuesday, Feb. 15**

**Pulgas Ridge**

**4.2 miles M**

Join docent naturalists Liz Foreman and Catherine Crawford-Swent to explore signs of spring. There will be viewing of an array of early blooming wildflowers. You will travel the Blue Oak and Dick Bishop trails and then climb to the top of the ridge on the Dusky-footed Woodrat Trail. Take in the views of the bay and surrounding hills from the ridgetop. Expect an elevation gain of about 600 feet on this moderately-paced outing with some uneven terrain.

## Three Cheers for the Red, White and Blue

**Monday, Feb. 21**

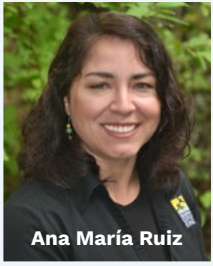
**Picchetti Ranch**

**5 miles M B**

Do you know the three early spring wildflowers that match our nation's colors? Join docent naturalists Paul Billig, Toni Gooch and Mary Ann Frank as you celebrate Presidents Day and search the trails of this preserve for these early risers. After exploring the area around the seasonal pond, you'll head out on the Zinfandel Trail and stop for lunch at the picnic area in Stevens Creek County Park. You'll hike at a moderate pace with about 500 feet gain in elevation. Participants are encouraged to dress in patriotic colors.



# The View from Here: Celebrating Midpen's First 50 years and Looking Ahead



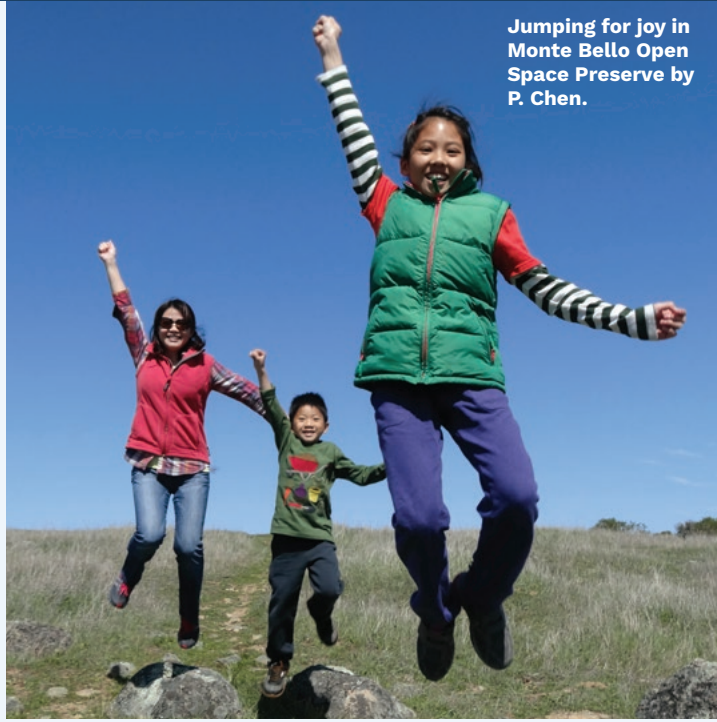
Ana María Ruiz

In January, we will kick off a year-long celebration recognizing the conservation accomplishments that we, as a community, have realized through the creation of the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District. Fifty years ago, a small group of concerned citizens came together to share an environmentally healthy and sustainable

vision for the future of our region – a vision that recognized the essential benefits natural and working lands can provide for people, as well as plants and animals. We may not have been talking about climate change and wildfire resiliency in quite the same way in 1972, but people clearly understood the need to protect clean air and clean water by preserving nature.

Throughout the coming year, we will revisit our history to bring you the stories of key people and partnerships, past and present, who were and continue to be instrumental in carrying out our mission. People like Nonette Hanko, who the Bay Nature Institute honors this spring as one of its 2022 Local Heroes, bestowing its Conservation Action Award for her significant contributions in founding Midpen (and helping to found the Peninsula Open Space Trust and Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority, too) and having served as an elected board member for 46 years.

**We will meet you on the trails with special anniversary-edition guided activities and surprise welcome pop-ups.**



Jumping for joy in Monte Bello Open Space Preserve by P. Chen.

Rediscover the lands that now form a 65,000-acre greenbelt of connected wildlife corridors and habitat, ridgelines and redwood forest, watersheds and scenic vistas. We will meet you on the trails with special anniversary-edition guided activities and surprise welcome pop-ups.

We are excited to gather together, celebrating and connecting at community events planned for the bayside, the Coastside and in between. We will even be online with contests and commentary to deepen your connection with nature from home.

Please join us as we look back and into the future to celebrate the people, the lands and the collective spirit of our community that allows us to preserve, protect, restore, educate and enjoy forever.

## MIDPENINSULA REGIONAL OPEN SPACE DISTRICT

Midpen helps plants, animals and people thrive throughout the greater Santa Cruz Mountains region by preserving a connected greenbelt of more than 65,000 acres of public open space. Midpen is a public agency created in 1972 by a grassroots voter initiative to protect the green spaces in parts of Santa Clara, San Mateo and Santa Cruz counties. We manage 26 open space preserves with nearly 250 miles of trails for you to explore, free of charge, all year long.

**Our Mission:** To acquire and preserve a regional greenbelt of open space land in perpetuity, protect and restore the natural environment and provide opportunities for ecologically sensitive public enjoyment and education.

**Our mission on the San Mateo County Coast:** To acquire and preserve in perpetuity open space land and agricultural land of regional significance, protect and restore the natural environment, preserve rural character, encourage viable agricultural use of land resources and provide opportunities for ecologically sensitive public enjoyment and education.

## BOARD MEETINGS

Board meetings are held on the second and fourth Wednesdays of each month at 7 p.m. Please visit [openspace.org/board-meetings](https://openspace.org/board-meetings) for details.

Ana María Ruiz, General Manager  
Leigh Ann Gessner, Open Space Views Editor  
Renée Fitzsimons, Guided Activities Editor

## Midpen's Wildland Fire Resiliency Program is a Year-Round Effort

Midpen is working year-round to implement our new Wildland Fire Resiliency Program, which increases our ecologically sensitive vegetation management work by approximately 600% over the next decade.

Each spring, Midpen staff identify priority vegetation management projects aimed at ecosystem resiliency. We also meet with representatives from fire departments throughout our region to learn about their priority projects areas. Our whiz geographic information system staff analyze these proposed projects using our Wildland Fire Resiliency Program criteria to annually prioritize the list.

Staff then plan for a year's worth of vegetation management projects, which begin after our natural resources staff and consultants survey each project site for sensitive plants, animals, waterways and archaeological sites that, if present, need extra protection.

We are continuing to build our capacity to implement our Wildland Fire Resiliency Program. In November, Christian Bonner joined Midpen as the new field resource specialist in our land and facilities department. He brings a solid background in arboriculture and natural resource management to oversee

vegetation management and natural resource projects throughout Midpen's public open space preserves.

Also, in November, the California Wildlife Conservation Board awarded \$1.5 million in grant funding to Midpen for forest restoration and resiliency vegetation management projects in priority areas on approximately 353 acres in Sierra Azul, Long Ridge, Saratoga Gap and Bear Creek Redwoods preserves in Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties. The California State Coastal Conservancy recently awarded a \$400,000 grant to Midpen for priority forest health and wildland fire resiliency projects on approximately 114 acres across various preserves in San Mateo County. This brings Midpen's total grant funding received since 2017 for fire-related projects to \$3.7 million.

Throughout the fall, Midpen staff was extremely busy putting grant funds to use on completing vegetation management projects in multiple preserves. New projects on the horizon are beginning this winter, and the annual cycle for identifying the next year's priority projects will begin again in the spring.

**Find project details at [openspace.org/fire](https://openspace.org/fire).**

Pacific newts include several different species such as California newts and the rough-skinned newt pictured here in Sierra Azul Open Space Preserve by Douglas Croft.



## See Something, Say Something

Responding to Concerns Raised by Community Scientists

Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District trail patrol volunteer Anne Parsons noticed an upsetting pattern that would set her on a path of community science activism. After each winter rainstorm, it was evident that cars were running over Pacific newts as the small, slow-moving amphibians tried to cross Alma Bridge Road. The public road separates the newts' wet season breeding grounds in the Lexington Reservoir from adjacent dry season habitats in the woodlands and chaparral of Midpen's Sierra Azul Open Space Preserve. Troubled by what she was seeing, Parsons began meticulously documenting newt mortality along the roadway using the smartphone app iNaturalist.

When Midpen biologists learned that newts were dying in large numbers near Midpen open space lands, they responded by connecting with crucial partners, including Santa Clara County Roads and Airports Department, Santa Clara County Parks Department, Valley Water, community scientists, the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society and the Sierra Club's Loma Prieta Chapter. Together, this group is exploring protective actions to support the safe passage of migrating newts. The first step in this interagency collaboration was to determine the level of impact to the local newt population from vehicle-wildlife collisions.

Based on the results of a 2020-21 road-related mortality study, funded in-part

by Midpen, researchers estimate that nearly 14,000 adult newts attempted to cross Alma Bridge Road during the survey period of November 2020 to March 2021. They found nearly a 40 percent road-related mortality rate of the amphibians during their migrations to and from the reservoir. Through modeling, the researchers predict that this level of mortality, if it continues, may result in a reduction of the local population, possibly to the point of local extinction in approximately 60 years.

Midpen and its partners are committed to reducing the impact of Alma Bridge Road vehicle traffic on the Lexington Basin newt population. Some of the potential corrective actions being explored include at-grade wildlife crossings embedded in the road surface and retrofitting existing culverts to support newt movement, among other solutions.

Based on the scope and scale of these interventions, planning and design are expected to be complex due to such factors as hydrology and geology, as well as the multiple landowners, land uses and existing facilities in the area. Midpen has pledged to provide funding for initial design, feasibility and alternatives analysis, and is in the process of securing the services of an engineering team to further explore feasible design solutions.

**For more information visit [openspace.org/newts](https://openspace.org/newts).**



Midpen staff use a remote-controlled mower, that provides many ecological benefits, during a vegetation management project in Pulgas Ridge Open Space Preserve by Leigh Ann Gessner/Midpen.





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## Stay Connected to Your Open Space

Sign up to receive Midpen's monthly email updates in our *Plug Into Nature* e-newsletter.  
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Follow us on social media:



## Nature Year-Round

Keep track of what's happening in nature all year with **Midpen's 50th anniversary commemorative 2022 wall calendar available now at Midpen's online store, along with other last-minute holiday gifts.** [openspace.org/store](https://openspace.org/store)



A view from the Johnston Ranch property looking over the Johnston House, farm fields and downtown Half Moon Bay; Below right: This barn on the property was recently restored by our partners at the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST). The uplands area of the Johnston Ranch property includes existing cattle grazing that will become part of Midpen's conservation grazing program by Leigh Ann Gessner/Midpen.

on the property. Visible from Highway 1, and a known landmark to many who live on or visit the coast, the Johnston House is open to the public for docent-led tours. The City of Half Moon Bay is currently planning a pedestrian and bike trail that will one day connect downtown Half Moon Bay with the Johnston House along Higgins Canyon Road.

**POST**, a private nonprofit land trust, will retain ownership of Johnston Ranch's 224 acres of prime agricultural lands that have been farmed by the Giusti family for decades. As part of their Farmland Program, POST intends to eventually sell the prime agricultural portion of the property to the farmer, subject to a conservation easement, protecting it from future development and ensuring it remains productively farmed in private ownership.



## Midpen Purchasing 644 Acres Near Half Moon Bay

Midpen, POST and City of Half Moon Bay Partner to Protect Open Space and Farmland

Many of the open spaces and working farmlands surrounding the City of Half Moon Bay on the rural San Mateo County Coast remain intact, in large part, because of the intentional efforts of farmers, ranchers, local voters and public-private partnerships like the one between Midpen and Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST). The 868-acre Johnston Ranch property, bordering the City of Half Moon Bay to the south, is an excellent example of these efforts in action.

In November, the Midpen board of directors approved the purchase of a 644-acre portion of Johnston Ranch from POST for \$4.8 million. The purchase aligns with Midpen's community-supported Vision Plan and is funded by the 2014 voter-approved Measure AA and \$700,000 in grants from the Coastal Conservancy and California State Parks' Habitat Conservation Fund.

"By joining our resources and unique expertise, Midpen, POST and the City of Half Moon Bay are partnering to

keep Johnston Ranch protected as natural open space and agricultural working lands," Midpen General Manager Ana María Ruiz said. "We have a shared vision to balance natural resource protection and viable agriculture at Johnston Ranch with future opportunities for new community connections to nearby nature."

The iconic Coastside property is made up of rolling grassy hills, coastal scrub, the Arroyo Leon Creek corridor and agricultural lands. It was once slated to be developed into a golf course and luxury homes before POST preserved it in two transactions taking place in 1999 and 2001. After a lot-line adjustment process is completed with San Mateo County, the Johnston Ranch property will be preserved as follows:

**The City of Half Moon Bay** will continue to own the historic New England saltbox-style Johnston House located

**Midpen**, a public agency, is now managing the 644-acre Johnston Ranch uplands as part of its adjacent Miramontes Ridge Open Space Preserve. This work will include ranger patrol, environmental restoration and wildland fire resiliency work. The existing cattle grazing operations on the property will be incorporated into Midpen's conservation grazing program to help maintain coastal grassland habitat. Eventually, Midpen planners will begin a public process to explore the possibility of a new easy-access loop trail near the Johnston House to introduce ecologically sensitive recreation.

For more information visit [openspace.org/johnston-ranch](https://openspace.org/johnston-ranch).