

Lousy real estate market puts more land in conservationists hands

By Julie Cart, Los Angeles Times

VOLCANO LAKE – The news is distressing: A cratering real estate market, tight-fisted banks unwilling to make loans and no appetite among elected officials to let go of a dime.

So why are conservationists smiling?

It turns out that the tattered economy has cracked open a window of opportunity for groups seeking to set aside land for preservation. With property developers and speculators on the sidelines – and cautious folks electing to forgo building that cabin in the woods – desirable land is on the market for a fraction of its former price.

And thanks to laws extending tax breaks and other incentives, rural residents are lining up as never before to work with local land trusts in hopes of saving the family farm.

“There are some extraordinary deals out there, from [parcels in] the North Woods of Maine to timber companies divesting because there are no housing starts and they can’t sell their lumber,” said Rand Wentworth, president of the Land Trust Alliance.

Statistics are difficult to come by, but anecdotal evidence suggests that land conservation rates have maintained the pace of the first half of the decade. Total acres set aside by local, state and national trusts doubled from 2000 to 2005; a snapshot for 2005 to 2010 will be released in coming months.

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