



The 527-acre McIsaac Ranch on Point Reyes-Petaluma Road will be conserved in 2018. Photo: Michael Woolsey.

# Coming Home

## A Legacy of Dairying in Marin Comes Full Circle

Years ago, before he was born, Jim McIsaac's family had a couple of deerhound pups named Cloudy and Thunder. One day the pups took off up to Black Mountain. Jim's dad rode up there on a horse, found them and brought them back on his saddle.

Like Black Mountain, Jim's father, Neil McIsaac, looms large over this 527-acre ranch on Point Reyes-Petaluma Road in West Marin. Jim was only five years old when his family was forced to leave here for the construction of Nicasio Reservoir, but he does remember it. In fact, it's sort of burned in his memory just like the vivid family memory of his dad riding down off Black Mountain with the lost pups on his saddle.

The McIsaac family has been leasing this property to graze dairy heifers for 136 years. Jim's great-grandfather, a

dairyman from Nova Scotia, took a lease on the place in 1881. Jim's dad and Jim's uncle, Don McIsaac, took over from Jim's grandfather and worked it as partners, continuing to run dairy cattle here until Jim took the lease.

The dairy barn and Jim's childhood home are long gone now, removed as part of the reservoir project. But the pasture remains. Jim had been grazing here for nearly 40 years when one day, about a year ago, a "For Sale" sign appeared on the ranch. The owners had no interest in selling to a farmer, and Jim thought he would soon be forced off this land for the second time in his life.

Marin County has designated this land suitable for residential construction under its zoning, and because of the scenic location, just a few miles from Point Reyes National Seashore,

## A Virtuous Cycle




Photo: Paolo Vesca.

**S**ince its founding in 1980 as the first agricultural land trust in the nation, MALT has been a catalyst for a sustainable agricultural community in Marin. In large part because of MALT's support and influence, there's a stable, growing agricultural

economy built on land and agricultural permanence, innovation and diversification, and capital in the form of easement payments. All of this leads to a higher probability of agricultural ownership and continued agricultural use of land in Marin.

When we talk about sustainability, we mean more than organic or pasture-raised. Sustainable agriculture conserves natural resources, is profitable over the long term, and benefits the local community. In many regions, environmental conservation and successful farming and ranching are at odds, but here in Marin County they go hand in hand. With MALT's help and resources, land-owners steward their land in ways that protect water quality, improve soil health, sequester carbon and allow plants and animals to thrive. Thoughtful land management helps the farmer's bottom line, improves natural resources and protects MALT's investment.

In this issue of our newsletter, you'll read about some of these pioneering farmers, ranchers and organic producers. Grazing, as our featured rancher Jim McIsaac does on his property, helps maintain grassland habitat and conserves native plant and animal species. Other environmental benefits of healthy well-stewarded land include reduced wildfire threat from rangeland fires, soil carbon sequestration, increased soil water retention, and maintenance and provision of habitat for endangered species. Indeed, a virtuous cycle.



Jamison Watts  
Executive Director



Photo: Michael Woolsey.

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it was pretty clear these wide-open pastures dotted with the McIsaac family Holsteins would soon become a subdivision.

But it didn't end that way.

Jim and his wife, Sue, recently managed to purchase the ranch and are working with MALT to place an agricultural conservation easement on it. Easements not only restrict nonagricultural development, they also change the value and price, making it possible for a farmer to afford land that might instead be coveted for homes. MALT will raise the funds to purchase the easement through private donations, which will be matched by public funds from Marin's sales tax-funded Farmland Preservation Program, also known as Measure A. A Mandatory Agricultural Use (MAU) provision in the easement will guarantee the ranch stays in agriculture.

"It's been so long coming it's hard to believe," Jim says of finally being able to own the land his family has rented for four generations. He reflects on it as he stands on the highest point on the ranch where his cows haven't had a chance to graze yet after the winter rains brought chest-high grass. "It took so long for the rain to stop, we've been slammed," Jim comments. "We had some fence to get built, thistles mowed, heifers moved around. It never ends. We've got to start hauling manure next. And then silage..."

There aren't many trees on the place, but you can tell the wind blows. The smattering of trees all lean northward.





## Measure A Achievements

Approved in 2012, Measure A was a voter-approved sales tax dedicated to protecting parks, open space and farmland in Marin County. Since implemented in 2014, Measure A has allowed Marin County to award \$2.9 million in grants for farmland preservation. With the support of the county's Farmland Preservation Program, MALT has been able to protect six farms and ranches totaling 2,560 acres, providing habitat for common and special status species.

Rock outcrops are scattered across the mostly south-facing ranch and support a diverse range of native species. Meadowlarks are singing their summer song as they nest on the ground in these high pastures. California quail also call this ranch home. The California Natural Diversity Database (CNDDB) identifies habitat on or within one mile of the ranch that supports several rare species, including Marin checker lily, fragrant fritillary, pallid bat and foothill yellow-legged frog. Their habitat will be protected with the easement.

There are no structures or electricity at all on the ranch, only a few water troughs, one main cross-fence and a set of small corrals. Jim runs 80 cows—mostly Holstein replacement heifers for his dairy but also a few beef cows. When the heifers are ready to calve, he brings them home to the dairy in Novato to join the milking herd.

The heifers looking out over the top rail of the corrals Jim's dad built belong to the Lafranchi family, owners of Nicasio Valley Cheese Company. Jim subleases 225 acres of the ranch to the Lafranchis for grazing their replacement heifers. Both the Lafranchi operation and Jim's dairy operation have been certified organic for several years, and having access to these herbicide-free pastures is essential for their operations.

## Organic Certification

At the time the McIsaacs began dairying here, during the Gold Rush and for the next hundred years or so, West Marin was the main supplier of milk, cream, cheese and butter in the region. The many dairies in and around Point Reyes in the 1800s delivered butter and cheese to San Francisco by schooner and rail.

Now, there are far fewer dairies in Marin than in the previous century, and the industry has changed. There were 150 Marin County dairies in 1960, but there are only 25 today, according to the Marin County Cooperative Extension. Large dairies in other regions provide most of the milk products for the region and beyond while Marin's dairies have had to find a special niche in order to compete—organic milk and artisan cheese making. In 1994 Straus Family Creamery near Marshall was the first dairy west of the Mississippi to go organic. Cowgirl Creamery began using Straus milk in 1997 to make organic cheese and expanded to buy from other organic dairies, raising the demand for organic milk in Marin. Now approximately 70% of the dairies in Marin are organic.

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## The Steward

Invasive thistle control is clearly a point of pride for Jim. Very few manage to survive him. He carries his shovel in his jeep and his pickup.

“I will get after that distaff,” he says, pointing to small

group of invasive thistle. “I worked hard to dig up the purple star. To control thistle, you really have to hate thistle.”

While most ranchers use 4-wheelers, Jim likes to use a motorcycle. This land is steep. He can get to more places on 2 wheels. He has passed on his love of motorcycles and his hatred of thistles to his kids, and he likes to tell the story of his daughter Katie, who was out on the pasture

on the motorcycle and came home with a purple star thistle across her handlebars. She was just a kid, but she knew enough to pull it up. Later, Katie did the work to go through the organic certification process for this land. She’s now 35 and in seed sales.

“The kids were a big help growing up,” Jim recalls. “They could run any piece of equipment. If they saw a heifer off by herself, they knew enough to come tell me. They all have a great work ethic. They didn’t have any choice.”

His wife, Sue, had her own cows in high school, and she milked them and sold the milk to Petaluma Creamery. She helps Jim with the cattle and does the accounting. His kids have all been connected in some way to careers in agriculture. He has a few grandkids, too. Someday they may run dairy heifers here, pulling thistle and thinking of their great-grandfather riding his horse down from Black Mountain.

Going organic helps dairies survive here. “There are so many dairies in the valley and they can produce milk cheaper,” Jim explains. But because Jim’s operation is organic, now he’s able to milk fewer cows and still make it because he can sell his product at a premium.

An organic dairy has to be very careful about the feed for the cows. He takes care of thistle and weeds by hand, digging them out with a shovel one by one, rather than spraying an herbicide that would mean he couldn’t put the organic label on his milk.

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**“There’s no way we could own this land without MALT.” – Jim McIsaac**

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His operation, with the milking taking place in Novato, is dependent on this additional land and pasture here by Nicasio, and now he will own it and continue to steward it with help from MALT. According to Michelle Cooper, MALT’s stewardship manager, “Jim is a great steward of the land. He takes such good care of his place and it’s really satisfying to see him own this property.”

“There’s no way we could own this land without MALT,” Jim comments. “We wouldn’t have a chance.”

“I just turned 63 and took out a 20-year note,” he says, laughing at himself. “I always thought if we had the chance to buy it we would try. I was afraid if we didn’t try ... we’d always be sorry.”

## Your Legacy, Marin’s Farming Future

As a Legacy Giving Circle member, you are crucial to securing the future of Marin’s family farms and landscapes.

Learn about adding MALT to your estate plans through bequests, IRAs, life insurance, or real estate: Visit [www.malt.org/legacy](http://www.malt.org/legacy) or contact Brian Dill at (415) 663-1158 ext. 315 or [bdill@malt.org](mailto:bdill@malt.org).







## Birding Hike at Hamlet Ranch

*Saturday, September 16*

Shorebirds above Tomales Bay, raptors over the rangelands and songbirds along Walker Creek are all part of the thriving, diverse ecology at Hamlet Ranch. Bring your binoculars, your camera and your love of birds on this educational adventure. Learn from Point Blue ornithologists about the birds who call these habitats home, while program directors from Students and Teachers Restoring a Watershed (STRAW) show you the site of a recent creek restoration project.

**Time:** 10 a.m.–12 p.m.

**Place:** Hamlet Ranch, south of Tomales

**Hike Details:** Moderate hike; 4 miles

**What to Bring:** Binoculars, camera, hiking boots, walking stick for uneven terrain, hat, sunscreen, filled water bottle, layers of clothing

**Age Appropriate:** Ages 12 and up

**Cost:** \$15 MALT members | \$25 nonmembers



## Millerton Creek Ranch Fall Member Hike

*Saturday, October 14*

Are you a MALT member? If so, join us for a late-morning hike on Millerton Creek Ranch overlooking Tomales Bay. This ranch has undergone an amazing transformation in recent years and is home to grass-fed beef cattle, golden pasture-raised eggs and diverse wildlife habitat.

**Time:** 10 a.m.–12 p.m.

**Place:** Millerton Creek Ranch, north of Point Reyes Station

**Hike Details:** Two guided routes: a moderate 2.7-mile hike with a 500-foot elevation climb or a steeper 2-mile hike with a climb of 800 feet

**What to Bring:** Filled water bottle, hiking shoes, hat, sunscreen, layers of clothing, snacks

**Age Appropriate:** Ages 12 and up

**Cost:** Free to all members giving \$40 or more.



## MALT Day at the Pumpkin Patch

*Sunday, October 15*

Every year for the whole month of October, the Lafranchi family transforms MALT-protected Nicasio Valley Farms into an overflowing pumpkin patch filled with games, animals and delightful local foods. On Sunday, October 15, they invite you to celebrate MALT Day, giving a percentage of pumpkin sales to help MALT protect local farmland. Stop by our booth, sip some locally made cider and find out more about how you can engage in MALT's mission.

**Time:** 11 a.m.–3 p.m.

**Place:** Nicasio Valley Farms, Nicasio

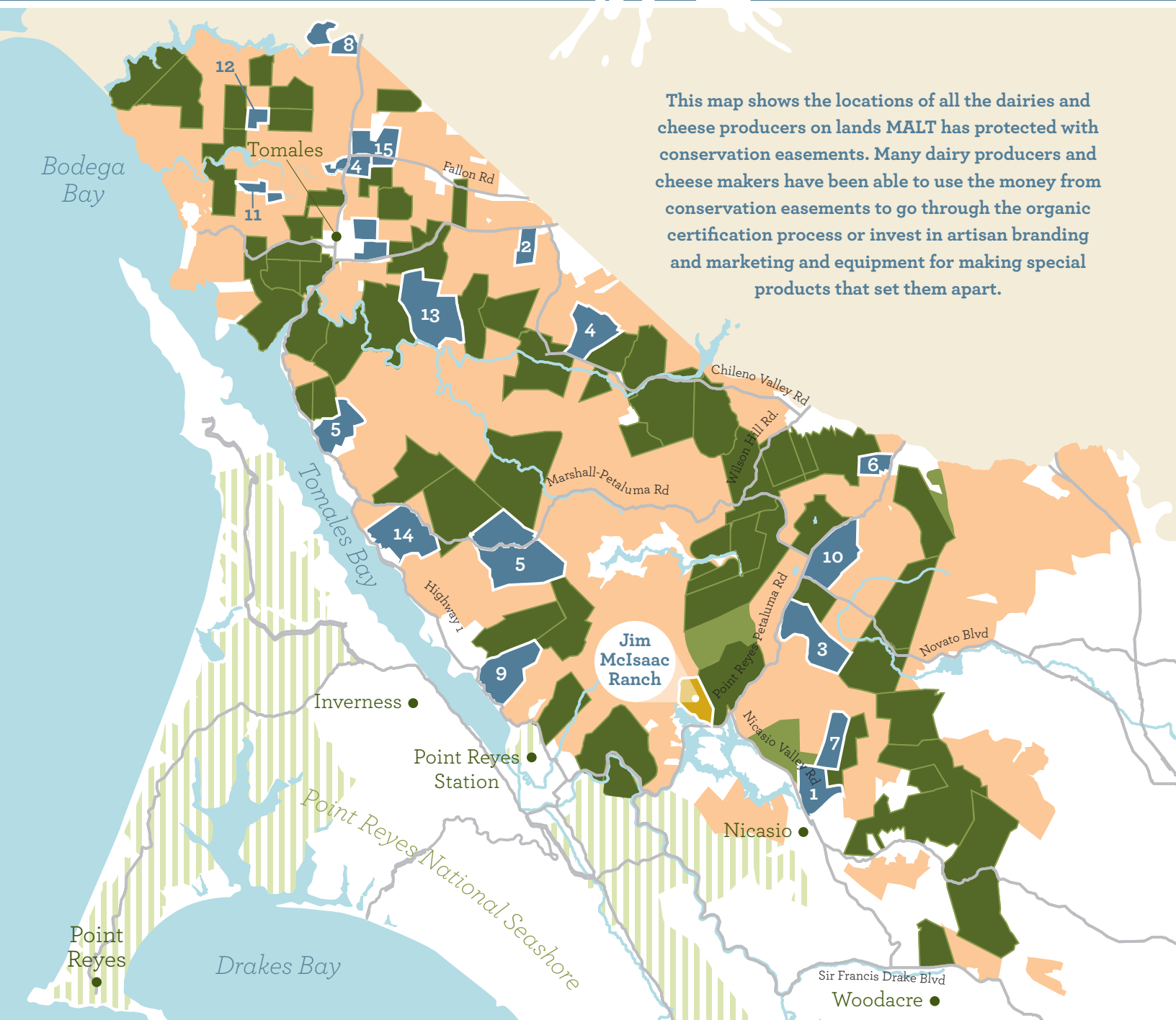
**What to Bring:** Hat, sunscreen

**Age Appropriate:** All ages

**Cost:** Free admission, no preregistration required



*Preregistration is required for all events, except MALT Day. Register at [malt.org/events](http://malt.org/events) or call (415) 663-1158 ext. 306.*



This map shows the locations of all the dairies and cheese producers on lands MALT has protected with conservation easements. Many dairy producers and cheese makers have been able to use the money from conservation easements to go through the organic certification process or invest in artisan branding and marketing and equipment for making special products that set them apart.

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| 1. Lafranchi Ranch & Nicasio Valley Cheese Co.                | 6. Volpi Ranch & Andante Dairy                               | 11. Toluma Farms (Organic) & Tomales Farmstead Creamery                  |
| 2. Neil McIsaac & Son Dairy (Organic)                         | 7. Doug & Cathy Ielmorini Dairy (Organic)                    | 12. Moretti Family Dairy (Organic)                                       |
| 3. Dolcini-Davidson Ranch (Organic)                           | 8. Ielmorini-Moody Dairy (Organic)                           | 13. Louis Silva Dairy (Organic) + Thornton Ranch + Bleating Heart Cheese |
| 4. Moreda Dairy (Organic)                                     | 9. Robert Giacomini Dairy & Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Co. | 14. Barinaga Ranch   |
| 5. Blakes Landing Farms (Organic) & S2—Straus Family Creamery | 10. Cypress Lane Dairy (Organic)                             | 15. Ramini Mozzarella Dairy  |

# Protecting Farmland, One Bottle at a Time



Aside from the quality of the milk, undeniably one of the attractions of buying a bottle of milk from Straus Family Creamery is the bottle itself. Not plastic, not cardboard, but classic reusable glass. Reusing the bottles around home is tempting—you can put flowers in them, or filtered water—but if you recycle your bottles by returning them to Straus, you'll be helping MALT.

Straus Family Creamery will donate 1¢ to MALT's Save-an-Acre Project for every Straus bottle returned to your place of purchase from July 1, 2017, through June 30, 2018.

MALT's Save-an-Acre Project allows people like you who care about the heritage of local family farming and the preservation of extraordinary vistas to have a direct impact on the future of Marin.

Founder and CEO Albert Straus said, "I know that with farming comes an inherent responsibility of being a good steward of the land. I'm grateful for all of MALT's efforts to ensure local farmland is being protected indefinitely for future generations."

For more information about Straus Family Creamery's mission and products, visit [www.strausfamilycreamery.com](http://www.strausfamilycreamery.com).



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## THE LANDS YOU HELP PROTECT PRODUCE A BOUNTY OF LOCAL FOOD

Find these MALT-protected producers at  
Good Eggs, an online farmers' market.

Cowgirl Creamery  
Nicasio Valley Cheese Company  
Point Reyes Farmstead Cheese Company  
Stemple Creek Ranch  
Straus Family Creamery  
Tomasles Farmstead Creamery

Enter the code MALT to get \$15 off your order + 10%  
of proceeds from every order you make September–  
November will go to MALT. Same day delivery!

[goodeggs.com](http://goodeggs.com)

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Co-Founded by Phyllis Faber and Ellen Straus

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# Protect the Places You Love

For as little as \$5 a month, you can play a major role in protecting local farmland from development. Gifts through MALT's monthly giving program provide predictable funding and save time, paper and postage—so your gift has more impact on saving farmland.

Join the Monthly Giving Circle and come along for our fall member hike at Millerton Creek Ranch on October 14. Join online at [www.malt.org/monthly-giving](http://www.malt.org/monthly-giving) or call (415) 663-1158 ext. 306.



Marin Agricultural Land Trust is a member-supported, nonprofit organization created in 1980 to protect Marin County farmland. Some of the Bay Area's most highly acclaimed meats, dairy products and organic crops are produced on farmland protected by MALT totaling more than 48,500 acres on 80 family farms and ranches.

To learn about Marin's working farms and ranches and the food they produce, visit [www.malt.org](http://www.malt.org).