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Foundation seeks community support to sustain farm

By: ADRIENNE A. AGUIRRE - Staff Writer

PAUMA VALLEY ---- In September, the Tierra Miguel Foundation secured \$1.9 million from the state and federal governments in loans and grants to save its 85-acre educational farm from development, but foundation officials say they need more money and time is running out.

Surrounded by beautiful, sky-scraping mountains and bordered by citrus and avocado groves, the Tierra Miguel Foundation farm, 14910 Pauma Valley Drive, is an educational demonstration farm that offers hands-on opportunities for adults and youths to learn about sustainable organic agriculture.

The foundation also offers numerous educational outreach and research programs and supplies more than 300 people with organic produce throughout Southern California.

The landowner, Bill Potter, bought the property adjacent to the Pauma Indian Reservation in 1986 with the intent to sell it to a housing developer. The market changed, however, and he wasn't able to sell until recently.

In the meantime, the nonprofit foundation began leasing the land in 2000 and offered to buy the acreage when it appeared Potter had finally found an interested developer. The foundation is now in a rush to raise the \$566,000 still needed to close escrow on the \$2.5 million property by Jan. 31.

Foundation officials are pleading for corporations, community groups and residents to pull together to sustain the farm.

"The great concern now is that farms are disappearing, and that is frightening," Charlene Orszag, foundation president and farm resident, said this week. "We want to stay here as a resource, and we need the community to back us up and keep us going."

Last month, the nonprofit educational Bell Gardens Farm in nearby Valley Center closed suddenly because of financial problems unknown to most of the community. Orszag said that after that closure many people said they had enjoyed visiting both farms over the years.

"People have told me if they had known they would have helped," said the 70-year-old environmentalist. "And I say, well now you know (about our need) and you can help."

Orszag said the foundation is committed to organic agriculture to protect the health of people and the planet by reducing the use of toxic chemicals from synthetic pesticides that can end up in the ground, air, water and food supply.

"Our mission is to work with a comprehensive system looking at the health of the farm, the people's health, the economy and sustainability and then be able to share that information with the community," said Rob Farmer, 29, founding farm education manager. "That is going to be our contribution."

In the past, the educational programs were frequented by private and charter schools. Now foundation officials are hoping to pick up programs previously run by Bell Gardens and reach out to public schools.

"We are very eager to build the bridges," Farmer said while standing among rows of red strawberries, baby carrots, Chinese cabbage, yellow onions and red potatoes. "We are inviting schools to come and make reservations."

The foundation also invites people to become shareholders in the farm by becoming a member of its Community Supported Agriculture program. For \$119 a month, people can become part owners in the farm. Members receive a weekly newsletter with

information on the history and traditions of farming among various cultures, upcoming events at the farm, nutritional facts and recipes. Members will also receive a weekly box filled with a variety of fresh organic fruits and vegetables from fields they can call their own. The produce is picked one day and delivered the next to pickup sites all over the county.

"This can be a wonderful resource to all of North County," Orszag said. "The intention is to help people really reconnect to the land."

People and corporations may also make straight tax-deductible donations to the capital campaign. The Rudolf Steiner Foundation has offered to provide a loan, based on donations pledged that can be used to help the foundation close escrow.

"If someone pledges just \$10 a month, that's \$120 a year (not including the supplemental loan)," Farmer said. "Now, if we can only get enough people to do that."

Another offer has been made on the land by a developer, and foundation representatives fear the land will be used for housing tracts and condominiums.

"Most people don't think of San Diego as an agricultural area, but it is a huge producer for the state," Orszag said. "We want to keep working lands alive. We can't let them disappear."

For more information on the Tierra Miguel Foundation farm, call (760) 742-1199 or visit the website at www.tierramiguel.org.

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