



These are California's mega-landowners and maps of what they control



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November 2, 2023

San Francisco Chronicle

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John Blanchard / The Chronicle

Who are California's biggest landowners?

According to a Chronicle analysis relying on 12.3 million property records obtained from property data company Regrid, the state's seven largest owners of private land share something in common: All are in the forestry or agriculture industries, ranging from long-standing logging companies to a nut tycoon.

Regrid's property numbers, which the company calculates based on county parcel data, are from 2022, meaning they don't reflect recent acquisitions or sales some of the businesses below have made. They're also conservative estimates, and while the Chronicle attempted to group companies with their affiliates and subsidiaries where possible, parcels of less than 1,000 acres were not included in that grouping.

Below are descriptions of each of these mega-landowners and maps of what they control. You can learn more about who owns any property in California by exploring our map of all 12.3 million properties here.

#1: Sierra Pacific Industries

Total acres in 2022: 1.74 million

Sierra Pacific Industries isn't just the largest private landowner in California, with about 1.74 million acres in the state as of 2022, per Regrid's data. It's the largest in the nation, overseeing more than 2.4 million acres of timberland in California, Oregon and Washington.

As a lumber producer, Sierra Pacific plants, manages and cuts down trees in its forests, which within California include land near Lake Shasta, Lake Tahoe and Sonora.

The company was founded in 1949 by the Emmerson family, which continues to run the business. Forbes estimates founder Archie Aldis "Red" Emmerson and his family are worth \$5 billion.

Though Sierra Pacific has partnered with conservation organizations like the Trust for Public Land, it has faced criticism from environmentalists for some of its logging practices, such as clear-cutting portions of its land. Sierra Pacific has maintained that it cuts a "tiny" share of existing trees, and that it plants more than it harvests.

In 2007, the company paid nearly \$13 million in a settlement with California and Placer County air quality agencies over allegations that Sierra Pacific's employees falsified pollution reports. Sierra Pacific said employees committed the violations without their managers' knowledge, and that it reported the issues as soon as it learned of them.

#2: Mendocino Redwood Co./Humboldt Redwood Co.

Total acres in 2022: 460,000

The San Francisco family that owns the Oakland Athletics and the Gap Inc. clothing retailers is also the majority owner of a big chunk of California's forests.

Through its investment firm Sansome Partners, the Fisher family owns a majority of Mendocino Redwood Co. and Humboldt Redwood Co., which combined own at least

460,000 acres of timberland in Mendocino, Humboldt and Sonoma counties.

While the Mendocino company was founded by the Fishers in 1998, its Humboldt sibling is actually the remnant of controversial Pacific Lumber Co., which Sansome Partners took control of after it went bankrupt in 2008.

Both Mendocino Redwood and Humboldt Redwood have drawn criticism from some environmentalists for cutting down trees. Some have also expressed concern that the company's use of herbicides could increase fire risk and endanger workers, a charge the businesses said was false. Like other logging companies, Mendocino and Humboldt have insisted they harvest only a small percentage of their trees every year.

#3: Green Diamond Resource Co.

Total acres in 2022: 360,000

Though the Green Diamond Resource Co. wasn't formed in California — it has its origins in a Washington-based logging business founded in 1890 — it now owns large swaths of the state's forests in Humboldt and Del Norte counties. Formally known as Simpson Resource Co., Green Diamond has at least 360,000 acres of land in California and manages more than 2 million acres across nine states.

The Reed family has run the timber company for five generations. Like most forestry companies, Green Diamond Resource Co. farms its trees for wood, which manufacturers can turn into furniture and building materials, and wood chips, which are used to make paper.

Green Diamond hasn't drawn as many headlines as some of the other companies on this list. But some environmentalists in Humboldt County have criticized Green Diamond for cutting down trees, and protesters have occupied trees near the Strawberry Rock Redwood Trail in Trinidad to stop them from being cut down. The company says it harvests less than 2% of its land annually and replaces the trees it brings down.

#4: New Forests

Total acres in 2022: 336,000

Among the largest forestry companies in California, New Forests is unique for a couple of reasons. First, it's relatively young, having been founded in 2005. And

second, it's based in Australia rather than the United States — though it does have a San Francisco office.

New Forests has purchased much of its at least 336,000 acres of land in California from existing lumber companies in recent years, with holdings including forests near Mount Shasta and the Oregon border.

Owned principally by two large Japanese companies, New Forests bills itself largely as an investment firm. It farms forests around the world for timber and, in California, carbon credits. The practice allows companies to earn credits by managing forests in a way that causes them to absorb more carbon dioxide. The credits can then be sold to businesses that want to release more carbon than is normally allowed.

A 2021 ProPublica and MIT Technology Review investigation found that a significant portion of carbon credits generated through New Forests projects didn't represent actual carbon reductions. The company, which says it has a third party verify its carbon offsets are legitimate, insisted that its forest management practices have helped its clients remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

#5: Tejon Ranch Co.

Total acres in 2022: 260,000

About an hour and a half drive from Los Angeles, Tejon Ranch is the largest single piece of privately-owned land in California. The site's 260,000 acres include farm land, a shopping center and a natural gas power plant. But most of the property remains wildland, where cattle herds graze and hunters shoot elk.

Recently, Tejon Ranch Co., which is publicly traded, has been trying to substantially increase the amount of commercial development on the land, with one project proposing more than 19,300 homes and 10 million square feet of commercial and industrial space.

Environmental groups have opposed the project, saying it would destroy habitats for the critically endangered California condor. And in March, after years of litigation, a Las Angeles County judge said the company needed to redo its environmental analysis before it could move forward with the proposal.

Tejon Ranch Co. has said it is committed to seeing the project through, and that the proposed community would implement environmentally friendly policies such as eliminating natural gas for homes and installing electric-vehicle chargers.

#6: J.G. Boswell Co.

Total acres in 2022: 206,000

At one point the biggest cotton producer in the country, J.G. Boswell Co.'s 206,000-acre farm in the San Joaquin Valley also grows tomatoes, almonds and pistachios.

The Pasadena-based company has drawn more attention for its power over water. A 2005 book by two L.A. Times journalists said the company used its political weight to turn Tulare Lake into fertile farmland. And when the lake refilled and flooded this year, a few other farmers said Boswell was diverting the natural flow of the floodwaters from its land to theirs, destroying their crops.

Boswell Co. has insisted that its building of canals and levees is a reasonable measure taken to protect its business interests, and that the redirected floodwaters were due to infrastructure projects and other landscape changes. A Kings County official also contested the claim that the company, founded in 1925, had drained Tulare Lake.

Boswell and its CEO employ many of the families in Kings County and have donated large sums of money to the city of Corcoran, where the farms are based, to help build its high school football stadium. But recently some community members have expressed concern that the company's extraction of groundwater is contributing to a growing sinkhole under the city. Others argue that the many water users in the area, not just Boswell, are to blame. Boswell has not responded to the Chronicle's requests for comment on the allegation.

#7: The Wonderful Co.

Total acres in 2022: 172,000

The empire of Stewart and Lynda Resnick, described in 2018 as the richest farmers in the United States, has its castle in California, where it owns about 172,000 acres. The couple's holding company, Wonderful Co., produces everything from Halos mandarin oranges to POM Wonderful pomegranate juice to Fiji Water.

The company, largely based in the Central Valley, also owns Sonoma County winery Landmark Wines and Wonderful Pistachios and Almonds.

Wonderful Co.'s status as the largest agricultural company in the world, according to Forbes, has made the Resnicks worth a combined \$8 billion as of 2022. It also

requires a huge amount of water, with the company's controlling interest in a Kern County aquifer allowing them to water their crops even during a statewide drought. The Resnicks have maintained that they saved the water bank by spending millions of dollars to get it running.

They've also pointed to their philanthropic efforts, which include pledging \$750 million to a new sustainability research center at the California Institute of Technology and building charter schools.

The company has also faced controversies unrelated to water. In 2016, the Resnicks apologized after their Paso Robles winery cut down about 100 acres of oak trees, saying they'd give the property to a conservation group and plant thousands of new trees on their other properties.

Link: <https://www.sfchronicle.com/projects/2023/top-california-landowners-map/>