

Grazing, Vernal Pools and Preserving the Land

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ABSTRACT. Cattlemen prefer winter pasture as opposed to feeding hay. The use of pasture containing vernal pools is a common seasonal operation, with light stocking from November to the end of May. Under conditions of light stocking, cattle will eat mostly grass, thus supporting the growth of vernal pool and upland plants. In contrast, the lack of grazing leaves high residual dry matter, which favors growth of medusahead and annual ryegrass. The low return on ranching investments makes it difficult to purchase land and maintain grazing under the pressure of other competing land uses (e.g., development pressure). The California Rangeland Trust and The Nature Conservancy provide conservation easements—allowing ranchers to counter development pressure and keep ranches intact for future generations.

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INTRODUCTION

I want to thank Barbara [Vlamiš] for working me through the process of getting me here. I was pretty nervous about it, I don't do a lot of public speaking and I'm not very adept at it.

I do remember that day, just like it was yesterday [reference to Tom Griggs' introductory comments about grazing problems with a Vina Plains Preserve lease during extremely high rainfall]. In fact, this year I think we have had close to the same problem as that year; and I guess you would call that [the decision to open all gates and spread the cattle throughout the preserve] adaptive management. I did appreciate Tom's support when I made that decision, because I was nervous about it. I knew what the contract said [requiring grazing restricted in time to specific units], but at the same time I had to do what I thought was right.

I want to cover a couple of areas with you this afternoon. One of them is the livestock ranching, which is my family's business, and the second thing is land conservation and land easements to protect open space and ranches.

LIVESTOCK RANCHING

A little about my background. I'm from Lassen County originally from Susanville to be exact. My son and daughter are both in the cattle business with

me and they are the 6th generation, of which I'm extremely proud. My family started up there in the 1860's and in wintertime we found winter forage where we could find it. And when mechanization came along, we started putting up hay and feeding cattle in the winter. All through that time I was traveling down through the Sacramento Valley, going to school and various meetings, seeing the annual grasslands from Red Bluff south. I was envious of the ranchers that were able to take advantage of the winter range instead of wrestling hay bails. So, when I met my wife, her family had a ranch in Vina, and she and I decided we wanted to be in the cattle business together. My father-in-law graciously leased the Vina ranch to us and that is where we live today.

We run cattle on that place which is basically north of deer creek up through Los Molinos east of Highway 99. The Nature Conservancy lease [for grazing on the initial tract of Vina Plains Preserve] allowed us to be able to expand our cattle numbers enough to be able to make a reasonable attempt at making a living and then also offer my son and daughter an opportunity to be in business with us themselves down the line. My son graduated from Cal Poly last year and he is now a partner of mine and is managing some of our ranch in Susanville. So the Vina Plains Preserve helped us to have a six generation family business. What we do with our cattle is we summer in Susanville, we have deeded ground, irrigated pasture, we also have some BLM leases up

there that we run our livestock on. And then in the wintertime, approximately the first of November or later depending on the rains, we start bringing the cattle down onto the annual grasslands. Every year is different so you have to have adaptive management. Some years you have plenty of early rains in the fall to start the grass, and sometimes you don't, so you have to adjust your numbers on a per-acre basis and quarterly. So, there is no such thing in my mind as "one size fits all" definition of raising cattle. You just have to make a constant series of adjustments all the time.

We turn the cattle out some time in November, and then I manage them the best way I know how. When possible I do rotational grazing, but when it gets real wet, as Tom described earlier [during the author's introduction], we have to open the gates and spread them out to have the least amount of impact on the ground. On my father-in-law's ranch that we lease, we also have a few vernal pools right in that area that's critical and I've been studying those vernal pools over the years. I learned what a meadow-foam was and about endangered species. I'm not a scientist by any means, but that does interest me. I started asking questions and comparing what I've got, and I was managing, with other pieces of ground. When we got the Nature Conservancy lease, their primary focus was the endangered plants and animals on that piece of ground. My focus was grazing, but we all came to the same conclusion, that if everything was properly managed, grazing as well as endangered plants and animals would do well. And I hope that's the way it's been. I'm very pleased with the results we've had on it.

The bottom line in my business is that if my cattle aren't doing well, then I'm not doing well. And if my cattle aren't doing well then it means the natural resources which I'm managing aren't doing well. So, it's a win-win for everybody concerned if these projects are managed correctly on all sides of the envelope.

I think that in the livestock business over the years, just like in any business, there have been producers who have not done a good job. Consequently, we've all got a bad reputation. One bad apple spoils the whole barrel. I see a new generation of cattlemen, ranchers and livestock people that are on the surface of coming forward and doing a much better job than our previous ancestors did. I know that my son will do a better job than I'm doing, and I know that I'm encouraged by that and I hope all of you are too. As

Carol [Witham] said earlier, there are lots of issues out there and it is important we all work together on them, all segments of the community, I think that we can win these things. If we continue to be separate in fighting our own battles, I'm not sure if we can get the continuity we need to make the right decisions.

LAND EASEMENT PROCESS

That leads me into the land easement process. I am a founding member and on the board of directors of the California Rangeland Trust (CRT). It is a cattlemen's land trust that came from the California cattlemen years ago. This provides a bridge between the ranching community and the environmental community, preserving California landscapes as parts of ranches. This entity was started in 1996 and it's still a relatively young organization. We're still learning a lot, but I'm pretty proud of what we have done. We have had alliances with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) on various projects up and down the state. I look forward to a continued relationship between CRT and TNC. This is another example of a collaborative effort that I think can get a lot of things done.

For those of you who don't know what conservation easements are, the way I look at it is, every piece of ground has conservation values worth preserving. These values may include vernal pools, open space next to an urban area, values to support clean air and clean water, you name it. For example, what we try to do is take a ranch that is under pressure to sell land for urban development and purchase the subdivision component of their real estate. All these things are subject to the appraisal process, market value, etc. Instead of that ranch having to take land and split off some of it to pay bills, or pay inheritance tax or whatever the case may be, we give money up front to pay the bank off. If the neighbor's ranch is for sale you can "1031" into that to allow his younger generation to come into the business. There's all kinds of possibilities.

As Nick from the Nature Conservancy will attest, when we first started this thing, there was a lot of skepticism and people really didn't understand what we were doing. Now that we have approximately 10 years under our belt, the most progressive ranchers understand and want to be a part of it. The funding mechanisms have dried up for a short period of time, so we're struggling to find the money to do the easements on ground that needs to be protected.

Woods: Grazing, Vernal Pools and Preserving the Land

We're learning how to do fundraising with lots and lots of BBQ's in order to raise money. To help us keep this new luck going, we are looking for grants and lists of money sources (that everybody else is using).

I think I heard one of the other speakers, say that 90% of the remaining vernal pool habitat in California is privately owned. I would have to agree with that and a good deal of this land is in family ranches—that are near and dear to my heart. I think that if we can keep these ranchers on the ground, if we can keep them being productive, and that's through good stewardship practices, we take away the possibility of them subdividing, whatever it may be. I think there's a win-win for everybody.

I would ask this group before I close to consider these ideas. A few acquisitions by state and federal

agencies are not the answer. It is important to keep the family ranchers on the ground, where they do the management, where they do the labor, and, if they agree to clear parameters about their stewardship responsibilities, everybody wins, especially society. So, I would ask this group to support the conservation easement movement.

One of the most memorable lines that was ever said to me was, "When you put a piece of open ground into an easement, for perpetuity, that's forever." But if you take a wonderful piece of ground with vernal pools or whatever the case may be on it and you pave it over, that too is forever. We want to eliminate as much as we can the loss of sensitive pieces of ground across the state, and take away the development possibilities and keep it in private hands. In my opinion, this specifically supports small size family ranches.

