

A Coalition Of The Willing: Environmentalists, Agencies and Ranchers All See Benefits of Managed Grazing

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ABSTRACT. Rangelands in California contain different habitats including grasslands, oak woodlands and oak savannas. These complex rangeland systems provide a myriad of ecosystem services to society such as wildlife habitat, healthy watersheds and climate change mitigation. Most of these rangelands are in private ownership and are disappearing at an alarming rate by being converted to other land uses such as exurban development, intensive agriculture and others. The California Rangeland Conservation Coalition, an alliance of environmental organizations, government agencies and the ranching community was formed in 2005 to reverse this trend. With a focus in the Central Valley, the Coalition works through interdisciplinary research, outreach and policy to enhance the sustainability of the ranching industry in California and maximize the provision of ecosystem services from rangelands.

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ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFIT OF RANGELANDS WITH MANAGED GRAZING

Somewhat surprisingly, environmentalists, agency staff and cattlemen, are working together in California, to advocate the benefits of managed grazing. In the nation's most populous state, with increasing demand for space, there is recognition that rangelands, and the abundance of wildlife and plant species that rely on them, are often found today due to land stewardship practices by ranchers. Many of these ranchers have owned and managed these lands for generations.

In a state with over 24 million acres of privately-grazed rangeland and a population of 36 million and growing, rangeland has been under threat in California for years. There is a demand for home sites from a public unfamiliar with where food comes from. United by the concern over California's disappearing

grasslands, conservationists representing some of California's most ardent environmental organizations have joined with the California Cattlemen's Association (CCA) and its members to simultaneously protect the state's natural resources and working ranches.

Not only was the threat of development a leading factor in bringing all the parties to the table, but scientific research conducted on ranches has shown that managed grazing *benefits* many species of grassland birds, native plants and threatened vernal pool species.

Pelayo Alvarez, with the Defenders of Wildlife, notes that research shows species ranging from the California tiger salamander to the Swainson's hawk and California red legged frogs benefit from managed grazing.

Alvarez states: "There are also instances where actively managed grazing has reduced

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invasive species—weeds that negatively impact cattle forage, create less desired habitat for wildlife and choke out native plants.” He adds: “When it comes to invasive species control, grazing can be a double-edged sword. Overgrazing can increase invasive species but when grazing is based on science it can be a very effective tool.”

In California’s Central Valley, research conducted by Jaymee Marty, with The Nature Conservancy, found that livestock grazing maintained native plant and invertebrate diversity in ephemeral wetlands or vernal pools.

Marty states: “My research documented what vernal pool experts have seen for decades: remove grazing from vernal pools and biodiversity suffers. My work measured the extent of that impact and it was significant.” She also states: “Ungrazed pools lost native plant and animal species and had less inundation during the winter.”

The inundation period of pools is critical, as shorter inundation periods make it difficult for some endemic vernal pool species to complete their life cycles.

There is also an under-appreciation that California’s Central Valley rangeland supports bird species of conservation concern, such as burrowing owls, prairie falcons, loggerhead shrikes, grasshopper sparrows and others. Combined with the accelerated conversion of grasslands to urban or intense agricultural uses, and one can make a solid argument that California’s rangelands are a crucial conservation priority in the state. That argument is routinely made by Ed Pandolfino, the conservation chair of the Sierra Foothills Audubon Society and a member of the local Sierra Club.

Pandolfino states: “The importance of cattle ranching to protecting this habitat goes

beyond simply preventing conversion to other uses. In general, when grazers are taken off the land, grassland birds suffer. Bird species of particular conservation concern, like mountain plovers and horned larks, all prefer habitats where the grasses are kept short. Wintering raptors cannot find their rodent prey in lands dominated by thick mats of invasive grasses or dense stands of thistle.” The habitat these species prefer comes from grazing.

A PARTNERSHIP IS BORN

Scientific studies illustrating the importance of grazing managed to benefit rangeland species, helped lead to a greater appreciation for private working rangelands and the creation of the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition (Rangeland Coalition). The Rangeland Coalition began in 2005 when 12 signatories drafted and signed a resolution that committed the signatories to protect rangelands within California’s Central Valley and Interior Coast Ranges. The California Rangeland Resolution (Appendix 1) outlines goals that include economic, environmental, political, human and social issues that all affect the long-term viability of private ranches and the natural resource values they provide. To date, over 100 organizations have voluntarily joined the Range-land Coalition working to achieve goals listed in the resolution.

Bruce Hafenfeld, past president of the California Cattlemen’s Association and policy division chairman for the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, states: “The simple fact is we needed to work together. There are not very many ranchers, and in a political climate where we struggle to row our own boat, we found ourselves in constant conflict.” He also recalls: “When we physically met with the agencies and the environmentalists, we found that we had a lot in common and at that time we agreed to move forward on those issues.”

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The partnership has brought together former foes who now work with the state's cattle producers to help focus attention on the value of private working rangelands, and the role managed grazing plays in promoting biodiversity in the state. This attention has brought new opportunities to collaboratively educate the public on the benefits of working rangelands and to improve policies to promote rangeland conservation in the state. (See Rangeland Coalition Strategic Plan 2010-2015, Appendix 2.)

COLLABORATION ON POLICIES TO VOLUNTARILY PRESERVE AND ENHANCE WORKING RANGELANDS

Some of the political initiatives the partnership has collaboratively worked on to preserve rangelands, which are home to some of the best vernal pools ecosystems, include the following policies.

Estate Tax

The partnership supports permanent, targeted reform of the estate tax in ways that both preserve private working ranches and reward commitments to lasting rangeland conservation. In California, the estate tax is one of the leading causes of the breakup and loss of family-owned ranching operations.

California ranching families, faced with estate tax debts, are often left with no choice but to liquidate assets or sell significant portions of their property. Therefore, permanent and targeted reform that reduces the estate tax burden on farming and ranching families, and that provides incentives for lasting rangeland conservation can assist in the preservation of California's large intact ranches that support a diversity of native plant and wildlife species.

Williamson Act (California Land Conservation Act of 1965)

The partners of the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition are strong supporters of the Williamson Act and truly recognize the role it plays in preserving rangeland. The Williamson Act allows local governments to voluntarily enter into contracts with private landowners (e.g., ranchers owning vernal pool landscapes) for the purpose of restricting specific parcels of land to agricultural or related open space use. In exchange the landowner receives property tax assessments which are lower than the normal fee because they are based upon agricultural value and open space uses, as opposed to full market value (development).

The voluntary contracts are 10-20 years in length. The state has for many years threatened to halt subvention funding to counties, which partially reimburses property tax revenues lost on land enrolled in the program; however, for the first time, the 2010-2011 California State Budget cut the subvention funding to counties. Without financial support from the state, some counties may be forced to eliminate this large statewide conservation program that protects rangelands, including vernal pools. The cancellation of this program will have serious implications for California landscapes. A survey found that 23% of ranchers said they were likely or very likely to end their entire ranching enterprise if they lost the Williamson Act program. Such an end to ranching will result in the conversion of grasslands, including vernal pools, to more intensive agricultural uses, parceling of large land tracts, and further development.

Farm Bill

Rangeland Coalition partners see the Farm Bill as intrinsically linked to our Coalition's

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ability to fulfill the guiding principles outlined in the California Rangeland Resolution (Appendix 1).

There is a clear need for increased funding for conservation programs, in addition to specific changes within these programs to make them effective in California and appealing to California ranchers. There are numerous pressures facing ranchers that jeopardize the viability of the ranching industry in California, and thus threaten a rich and varied landscape of grasslands, oak woodlands, vernal pools, riparian areas and other wetlands. These habitats support numerous imperiled species, many native plants that once flourished in the Central Valley, and the highest diversity and density of wintering raptors anywhere in North America.

Under the Farm Bill, programs such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) are authorized. EQIP is an important conservation program that provides critical cost-share funding for required air, water and habitat improvements. The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) is utilized by ranchers for assistance in programs such as perennial grassland restoration, riparian restoration, implementing solar panels for pumps, and erosion reduction. California ranchers also look to WHIP for funding of conservation projects, such as stockpond improvements, that benefit sensitive, threatened or endangered species, including the California tiger salamander and the California red-legged frog.

Under the Farm Bill there are also easement programs that play a role in preserving rangelands, including vernal pools. The Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP) is important to assist in carrying out the goal of the California Rangeland Resolution to protect ranching, by utilizing conservation easements to preserve working landscapes in perpetuity. This pro-

gram has protected vernal pool landscapes in the state.

The Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) is another program that provides funding for easements to preserve working rangelands under the Farm Bill. The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is another easement program authorized under the Farm Bill. In the 2008 Farm Bill, the WRP program was expanded to include a Grazing Reserved Rights Pilot Program which allows livestock grazing on enrolled land as part of a Natural Resources Conservation Service-approved wetlands conservation and rotational grazing management plan. With it first being implemented in California in 2011, there is hope that this program will provide another means to preserve vernal pool ecosystems and other rangeland habitats.

CONCLUSIONS

The cooperative conservation of California's natural resources is incredibly important to both ranchers and the conservation community. Ranchers struggle to maintain economical operations, while striving to enhance and support wildlife and plant diversity. Though members of the Rangeland Coalition have not always seen eye to eye in the past, and still bring different perspectives to the table, we all strongly agree that keeping open spaces open and helping good stewards remain on the land is important to the future of California.

By participating in this partnership (coalition), no entity has written a blank check for agreement on all issues, but instead we have developed open communications for education and discussion and have learned how to collaborate with a new group of stakeholders in supporting common goals.

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APPENDIX 1. California Rangeland Resolution

The undersigned recognize the critical importance of California's privately owned rangelands, particularly that significant portion that encircles the Central Valley and includes the adjacent grasslands and oak woodlands, including the Sierra foothills and the interior coast ranges. These lands support important ecosystems and are the foundation for the ranching industry that owns them.

WHEREAS, these rangelands include a rich and varied landscape of grasslands, oak woodlands, vernal pools, riparian areas and wetlands, which support numerous imperiled species, many native plants once common in the Central Valley, and are home to the highest diversity and density of wintering raptors anywhere in North America;

WHEREAS, these rangelands are often located in California's fastest-growing counties and are at significant risk of conversion to development and other uses;

WHEREAS, these rangelands, and the species that rely on these habitats, largely persist today due to the positive and experienced grazing and other land stewardship practices of the ranchers that have owned and managed these lands and are committed to a healthy future for their working landscapes;

WHEREAS, these rangelands are a critical foundation of the economic and social fabric of California's ranching industry and rural communities, and will only continue to provide this important working landscape for California's plants, fish and wildlife if private rangelands remain in ranching;

THEREFORE, we declare that it is our goal to collaboratively work together to protect and enhance the rangeland landscape that encircles California's Central Valley and includes adjacent grasslands and oak woodlands by:

- Keeping common species common on private working landscapes;
- Working to recover imperiled species and enhancing habitat on rangelands while seeking to minimize regulations on private lands and streamline processes;
- Supporting the long-term viability of the ranching industry and its culture by providing economic, social and other incentives and by reducing burdens to proactive stewardship on private ranchlands;
- Increasing private, state and federal funding, technical expertise and other assistance to continue and expand the ranching community's beneficial land stewardship practices that benefit sensitive species and are fully compatible with normal ranching practices;
- Encouraging voluntary, collaborative and locally-led conservation that has proven to be very effective in maintaining and enhancing working landscapes; and
- Educating the public about the benefits of grazing and ranching in these rangelands.

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APPENDIX 2. Rangeland Coalition Strategic Plan 2010-2015

MISSION: Catalyze partnerships between ranchers, environmentalists and government entities to conserve and enhance the ecological values and economic viability of California's working rangelands for posterity.

GOAL: Enhance the economic viability of ranching

OBJECTIVE: Support targeted estate tax reform.

OBJECTIVE: Restore Williamson Act subvention funding.

OBJECTIVE: Influence consistent, local land use planning that recognizes the value of rangelands.

OBJECTIVE: Support conservation easement program funding and the voluntary use of conservation easement on private working rangelands.

OBJECTIVE: Where required, support that mitigation takes place in the form of voluntary easements on private working rangelands.

GOAL: Increase the awareness and develop recognition of the importance of private working rangelands

OBJECTIVE: Influence the Farm Bill to benefit the sustainability of California ranchers and rangelands.

OBJECTIVE: Improve appreciation for working rangelands.

OBJECTIVE: Support research that informs public policy and outreach objectives.

GOAL: Enhance ecological values of rangelands and preserve working ranches

OBJECTIVE: Influence the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service easement programs and Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

OBJECTIVE: Improve regulatory atmosphere for voluntary conservation projects.

OBJECTIVE: Increase the use of grazing as a conservation and management tool on public lands within the Coalition Focus Area.

OBJECTIVE: Provide education on stewardship tools.

GOAL: Ensure the Long-Term Viability of the Rangeland Coalition

OBJECTIVE: Establish sustainable funding for Rangeland Coalition staff and activities.

OBJECTIVE: Increase Rangeland Coalition partner participation in activities.

OBJECTIVE: Host local outreach sessions.