

Part II:

California Struggles with Land-Use Issues

Grapes, housing development and conservation easements compete for space.

by **Andra Campbell**

From California's land-use issues to southern Oregon's water issues, ranchers are finding it more and more difficult to survive the pressures of everyday life. Ranching lifestyles are changing due to increasing population and environmental concerns, forcing many ranchers to consider nontraditional ways of raising their cattle and to become more involved in local issues, such as zoning and irrigation rights.

In this series
freelancer Andra
Campbell, who is
herself a cattowoman,
takes a firsthand look
at the issues faced by
Western ranchers.

Ranchers are finding it more difficult to survive the pressures of everyday life in California. Increasing land prices, local zoning, and tax and bond issues mean ranchers are spending time and money fighting for their land. As we all know, time is something people in agriculture don't have a lot of, and money is getting harder to come by.

There is no other place in the world like California, with its spectacular coastline and Alpine peaks, rugged foothills and shimmering deserts, riverside forests and vast grasslands, oak woodlands and marshes. People are moving there in record numbers. The population is expected to rise from 32 million to 50 million by the year 2025.

California has more than 100 million acres of land, 40 million of which are range and pasture lands. Of those 40 million acres, the federal government owns approximately half, making many ranchers dependent on the availability of federal grazing permits. There are 5 million head of cattle in the state, existing on land from arid desert to coastal flats, from forest land to high mountain meadows.

All of those people and all of those cattle are competing for some of the same land. Unfortunately for cattlemen, that means it costs more to raise cattle.

The need to know

Mark Nelson, second vice president of the California Cattlemen's Association (CCA), says he sees three pressures regarding land issues facing cattlemen in California — grapes, housing development and conservation easements.

"Winter ground is getting hard to come by," Nelson says. "Grape growers are willing to pay \$3,800 an acre for land for which cattlemen can only afford to pay \$350 to \$500 an acre. Housing developments are going up everywhere because of the increase in population. And conservation easements are being bought up by people like The

Nature Conservancy — which is not necessarily a bad thing — as long as the rancher knows what he is getting into."

Nelson says ranchers need to make sure they are involved in the structure of the easement so it doesn't make their property worth less because they can't turn out their cows at the right time. "Ranchers need to be in on all the rules and regulations from the beginning regarding the easement," Nelson says.

Nelson is a land developer and the owner of Five Star Land & Livestock, a purebred Angus operation in Wilton, Calif. He says that in Sacramento, when a developer doesn't get the decision he wants regarding zoning, he goes to a vote of the people to override the county board. This is called ballot-box planning and can have lasting effects on "prime agricultural" land.

"If the ranchers know what they are doing, they can get \$6,000 per acre or more and move out of state and get a much larger operation. Who blames the rancher?" Nelson says. Most of the time it doesn't happen that way.

"Usually it's a catch-22 situation — the poor rancher going broke," he says. "And who's to say we should not let him 'exit' by selling off to a developer? It's usually the developer who options the rancher's land and then makes the profit while the rancher goes away, without much to show for his long-term ownership of the land."

Balancing rights

John Braly, executive vice president of CCA, says local zoning, tax and bond issues, and acquiring more private property are land issues affecting cattlemen in California today. "Because of California's increasing population, local zoning has become a huge problem," Braly says. "Here at CCA we are working toward balancing property rights with protection."

There are two conflicting sides, Braly says, with the significant housing shortage on one side and the movement to increase

open spaces on the other. “Ranchers, farmers, environmentalists — all want to increase the open spaces in California, while the population demands more houses and development.”

“The tax and bond money going toward acquiring more private property is not manageable. It takes more private property off the tax roll and diminishes the necessary services,” Braly says. “This is one of the reasons CCA set up the California Rangeland Trust in 1998. Now we can direct foundation

money toward those in our industry who would like to continue ranching, plus enter a conservation easement with all or part of their ranch. The rancher gets the money for development rights, plus tax breaks.”

Dan Macon, executive director for the California Rangeland Trust says the trust was established because more landowners were looking at conservation easements but weren’t comfortable with — or didn’t know about — the traditional methods of acquiring an easement.

“Ranchers can contact us or another group like The Nature Conservancy or Trust for Public Land and define an area to be sold or donated as an easement,” Macon says. “The land has to provide watershed value, endangered species habitat or provide open spaces.”

Plus, the rancher has to realize that he has sold the easement. It is now a part of the title to the property and gets transferred to new owners just like the barn or corrals. The land cannot be developed and stays on the local tax roll.

California was the second state, following Colorado’s lead, to develop a cattlemen-based land trust. “We are able to protect land that society has said it values,” Macon says. “Ranches offer the best of all possible worlds — wildlife habitat and wide-open spaces, as well as economic productivity.”

The trust receives money from the Packard Foundation, the Irving Foundation and the state government. “Proposition 12 passed in May 2000 and provides sales of bonds to which we have some access,” Macon says.

Not all land in California is a priority, though. “We would like to have our own source of funds for land in California that can’t get funding from other sources,” Macon says.

Sparrowk Livestock, Clements, Calif., manages commercial cattle on ranches in

both California and Oregon. Jack Sparrowk says they have changed many of their management practices because of land-use issues.

“We are in the process of putting an easement on our ranch in Sierra Valley, California, through the California Rangeland Trust,” Sparrowk says. He says that his

partner from Colorado and he aren’t interested in developing the ranch, Bar One Cattle Co.; they want to keep it intact, providing wide-open space.

“The ranch is 35 miles from Reno,” says

Sparrowk, who sees subdivisions heading that way in 10-15 years. “We want to keep the ranch in agriculture, as well as enhance the waterfowl, wildlife and fish habitat found on the ranch.”

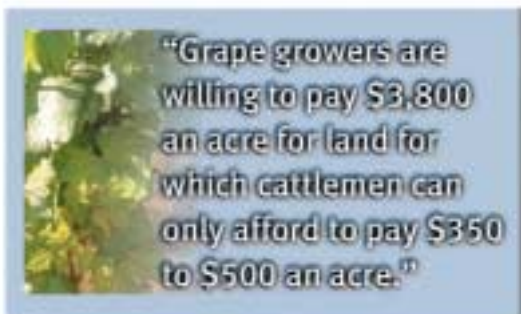
Sparrowk says they have changed many of their grazing practices in both states on both deeded and forest permits. “We turn our cattle out earlier and have fenced out many of the riparian areas found on the ranches,” he says.

They also have leased land from The Nature Conservancy, a private, nonprofit organization. “We started working closely with The Nature Conservancy in developing management plans,” Sparrowk says.

Cattle are turned out a little differently than what was traditional in order for ponds and streams, wildlife and fish to benefit. “It’s worked out well,” he maintains. “Everybody has cooperated.”

The Nature Conservancy says it wants to safeguard the natural areas that make California remarkable. It says the clock is ticking with the increase in population.

Founded in 1951, The Nature Conservancy is the leading international conservation group. It has more than 100



preserves and projects throughout California, most of which are open to the public for educational uses and recreation, such as hiking, nature study, bird-watching and photography.

“Ranchers and conservationists are natural allies,” says Chris Unkel with The Nature Conservancy in Sacramento, Calif. “I am surprised we haven’t found ways in the past to work together. I do see us working together in the future because of the common interest we have in securing open spaces for both wildlife and the ranching way of life.”

