

Boots & Birkenstocks

Cattlemen and environmentalists partner to preserve California's rangeland.

by *Meghan Richey*

It's not often that cattle ranching organizations and environmental conservation organizations agree on much of anything, but a new partnership aimed at preserving California's rangeland is working to change that.

Traditionally seen as rivals, more than 40 groups from the environmental and ranching

communities have put their past differences behind them to join together as signatories of the California Rangeland Resolution, an effort that aims to preserve privately owned rangelands within California's central valley, surrounding foothills and interior coastal ranges.

"There's a lot of battling going on across the country on environmental issues, and it's nice to be a part of

something that's proactive and positive," says Kim Delfino, California programs director of Defenders of Wildlife, a signatory of the resolution and an organization dedicated to preserving wild animals and native plants in their natural communities.

"Even though we each still bring different perspectives to the table, all the signatories strongly agree that maintaining the open spaces and helping good stewards remain on their land is important to the future of California," says Tracy Schohr, director of industry affairs for the California Cattlemen's Association (CCA), another resolution signatory.

The resolution says, in part, that the signatories "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 coastal ranges. These lands support important ecosystems and are the foundation for the ranching industry that owns them."

After describing the harmony that exists in these ecosystems because of cattle grazing and the efforts of ranchers who own the land, the resolution concludes that keeping these lands in family ranching is the best option for both the agriculture industry and the environment. And so the resolution's signatories pledge to "work together to protect and enhance the rangeland landscape," with goals that include:

- keeping common species common on private working landscapes;
- working to recover imperiled species and enhancing habitat on rangelands while minimizing regulations on private lands;
- educating the public about the benefits of grazing and ranching in these grasslands (see "Scientific Support for Grazing"); and
- supporting the long-term viability of the ranching industry and its culture by reducing burdens to proactive stewardship and providing economic incentives.

To read the resolution in its entirety and to see a complete list of those who have pledged to work together on this cause, visit www.calcattlemen.org and click on the California Rangeland Resolution link.

Gathering support

The groundwork for this resolution started during fall 2004. A coalition of environmental organizations wrote to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) urging the agency to do more to



protect California's rangelands. Steve Thompson, California/Nevada operations officer of USFWS, says the letter recognized that preserving habitat such as rangeland also preserves species, and it indicated the environmental organizations' willingness to commit to the cause of preserving privately owned grasslands.

Excited by the prospect of a partnership between the ranching community and the coalition of environmental organizations, Thompson shared the letter with CCA members at their annual convention that same fall. Likewise optimistic about a joint effort to preserve privately owned rangeland, CCA enthusiastically pledged its support and started planning an event to bring the stakeholders together.

After much planning by CCA staff and volunteers from other organizations, about 20 representatives from the ranching community, environmental organizations and state agencies gathered in August 2005 at the San Francisco area ranch of Tim Koopman, CCA's second vice president.

"We sat in his barn, and through a long day of discussion, we realized we had four common goals — keeping private ranching lands in ranching, keeping common species common, encouraging habitat protection on ranching lands by providing incentives and removing existing disincentives, and creating a template for future cooperation among participants," Schohr says. "At the end of the day, participants agreed to continue the cooperative spirit of conservation, thus initiating the development of the California Rangeland Resolution."

The historic agreement was unveiled in Sacramento, Calif., on Jan. 11, 2006, with more than 80 resolution signatory representatives assembled. The resolution was then presented to California legislators, and the signatories are now hoping it will be brought through the state house and the state senate for approval.

In March, a group of representatives from CCA, Defenders of Wildlife, The Nature Conservancy, the California Farm Bureau and Environmental Defense went to Washington, D.C., to lobby Congress on behalf of the resolution signatories (see "Unmet needs").

The group charged itself with the challenging task of finding ways to implement conservation practices that are both environmentally sustainable and economically viable. Plus, they maintain this must be accomplished with voluntary

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Unmet needs

California's beef cattle industry is valued at \$1.58 billion, a hefty sum that helps the state annually secure its No. 1 ranking as the nation's top-producing agricultural state. Yet more often than not, the state's reputation as a haven for environmental conservationists overpowers its record of agricultural production.

It may come as a surprise, then, that California ranks last nationally in receiving funding for conservation programs, says Tracy Schohr, director of industry affairs for the California Cattlemen's Association (CCA).

"California in general, but its Central Valley in particular, is experiencing tremendous development growth. Homes are popping up all over the place, and cities are expanding rapidly," says Kim Delfino, California programs director of Defenders of Wildlife. "A lot of California rangeland that offers habitat for wildlife is being lost to development rather than being placed in conservation programs because the funds aren't there to support conservation."

CCA reports that more than 24,000 acres per year are lost to development, steadily diminishing California's 57.1 million acres of rangeland — 50% of which is privately owned.

Despite this development trend, the most recent figures available, from 2002, show California's conservation program spending from the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Farm Service Agency (FSA) totaled less than one-quarter of a percent of the value of the state's agricultural production, Schohr explains.

She points out that Iowa, Illinois and Kansas are together similar in size to California, yet they boast a combined 311 NRCS offices with 1,408 staff members, compared to her state's 70 offices and 400 staff members. She also notes the large numbers of threatened and endangered species that call California home — the most in the nation.

Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), the federal government lists 308 California species as threatened or endangered, and the state of California lists an additional 301 species on its state-level ESA list.

"These privately owned rangelands support a stunning variety and abundance of wildlife," says Ed Panedolfino, conservation chair of the Sierra Foothills Audubon Society. "If we are to save these grasslands, we need to find more ways to support the positive land-management practices of the private families that own these lands."

Schohr says California's diverse population of threatened and endangered species largely contributes to the state having "the strongest environmental standards in the nation, requiring ranchers to perform at a level that exemplifies good conservation, yet they still don't have adequate access to conservation funding programs."

Land values further complicate California ranchers' need for increased funding for conservation programs, she continues. The potential for development drives West Coast land prices to sky-high levels, increasing the temptation and economic viability of selling privately owned rangeland to a buyer who does not intend to keep the land in its present agricultural use. Since many of the state's conservation programs deliver payments only on the land's ag-use value, rather than its fair market value, Schohr says they offer little participation incentive and are largely ineffective in California's high land-value areas.

Increasing conservation funds

"Through this resolution, we're looking to increase funding for conservation programs so that more ranchers can implement conservation practices without financial burden," Delfino says. "There's a huge need, but not enough money to fill that need."

The signatories of the California Rangeland Resolution, a partnership forged by members of the environmental and agricultural communities that have pledged to work together to preserve California rangeland, have lobbied in Washington, D.C., to increase funding for programs offered under the Farm Bill.

"We're trying to increase funding for programs like EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program), WHIP (Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program), WRP (Wetlands Reserve Program), Grasslands Reserve Program, Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, and other current Farm Bill programs that could provide benefits but are unfortunately tapped out already," Delfino explains. "We're also looking at those programs and trying to see what adjustments need to be made to make them more beneficial to ranchers and rangeland specifically."

"Funding could be a roadblock to accomplishing the rangeland preservation goals of the resolution," Delfino says. "There's a great need out there, and right now the funding does not match the need."

participation; the project would fail if it were ruled by legal regulations.

“California ranchers have enough regulations on them already — the most in the nation — we don’t need more,” Koopman explains. “You can get more done under a voluntary program than by forcing people to do something; that’s why this is a totally voluntary program for both cattlemen and the environmental groups.”

Removing existing disincentives

Although many rangeland owners may want to enhance and restore natural

resources on their property, some may not complete conservation projects because they fear penalties from regulatory restrictions designed to protect species listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), Schohr says. The resolution signatories are working to remove such disincentives to conservation.

Common conservation projects in California include improving livestock ponds, restoring stream banks, implementing rotational grazing, and replanting riparian and wetland areas with environmentally appropriate vegetation. In the process of making improvements to the rangeland, new

habitat is sometimes created that is suitable for species listed as endangered or threatened.

State and federal regulatory restrictions often limit the use of the rangeland once habitat is present that could potentially house listed species, Schohr explains. Thus, a double-edged sword emerges — the rancher has made the rangeland environment better than it was, yet he could be subject to penalties if he continues using the land for ranching without yielding to the new population of endangered species.

“While ranchers voluntarily enhance their natural resources, they are not willing to engage in those activities without assurance that future regulatory restrictions will not be imposed if they create habitat for listed species,” Schohr says.

Resolution signatories point to Safe Harbor Agreements as one tool that should be more heavily utilized to protect ranchers in these situations.

Delfino explains that Safe Harbor Agreements are designed to “encourage any landowner to do proactive enhancements on their property without fear of reprisal under the Endangered Species Act.

“If a rancher commits to do a habitat enhancement project on his or her land and that project causes an endangered species to increase in number, the rancher will not be penalized under the ESA if their normal management practices would then cause a take of the species,” she continues. “It’s like an unofficial permit for take of the species.”

Private landowners nationwide can apply for a Safe Harbor Agreement from the USFWS. By informing cattle ranchers about this tool, resolution signatories hope it will remove some of the regulatory disincentives that prevent many landowners from implementing conservation practices on their land.

Creating new incentives

The coalition supports creating incentives for landowners who participate in rangeland conservation through a provision that excludes capital gains from the sale of conservation easements. Conservation easements allow the landowner to receive a one-time payment in exchange for the rights to the land’s development potential, Schohr explains. Ranchers continue to own the land and are able to keep it in its present agricultural use, but the rights to development are permanently forfeited.

Koopman says that by “excluding capital gains from the sale of these easements, the stewardship of the land is secured for eternity

Scientific support for grazing

The environmental and agricultural communities have a history of going head-to-head when it comes to the issue of cattle grazing on native grasslands. Traditionally, conservationists have argued that grazing disrupts the natural balance of the ecosystem, while ranchers have maintained that it’s an excellent management tool.

Now studies are emerging that offer empirical support for the continuation of cattle grazing in select grassland environments, allowing environmental signatories of the resolution to help educate the rest of the environmental community.

A study published in the October 2005 issue of the *Journal of Conservation Biology*, and supported by California research in conjunction with The Nature Conservancy, concludes that cattle grazing can be beneficial for temporary wetlands that fill seasonally with water. Also called vernal pools, these temporary wetlands frequently dot California’s rangelands and have long been a topic of management contention.

“The debate over grazing needs to move beyond the simple dichotomy of whether it is good or bad and be properly evaluated,” Jaymee Marty, the study’s primary author, wrote. “One should not assume livestock and ranching operations are necessarily damaging to native [plant and animal] communities.”

According to Marty’s study, wildlife that depend on vernal pools’ increasingly rare habitat actually become more diverse and abundant with cattle grazing. The researchers concluded that without grazing, vernal pools evaporate about twice as fast as grazed pools, which eliminates the habitat supporting rare species such as the fairy shrimp and tiger salamander. They also found that plant diversity decreased in the ungrazed ponds, as did the diversity of water-dwelling invertebrates.

The study explained that grazing helps prolong the pools’ critical habitat because the cattle consume the non-native grasses that would otherwise deplete the pools’ water before the threatened and endangered species complete their life cycles.

With the scientific support offered by this study and others, organizations like Defenders of Wildlife are working to educate other conservationists about the benefits of cattle grazing on California’s grasslands.

“These grasslands are an example of an ecosystem that has grown up with grazing being a part of it. Prior to cattle grazing the Central Valley grasslands, the state had enormous herds of elk and deer,” says Kim Delfino, California programs director for Defenders of Wildlife. “We don’t have the quantities of elk and deer in this ecosystem any longer, so cattle have become the replacement tool for the disappeared elk herds.”

Ranchers like Tim Koopman of Sunol, Calif., have seen firsthand the quality downfall that can happen in environments where grazing was inappropriately removed.

“When grazing is removed as a vegetation management tool, there’s often a massive degradation of the habitat values,” he says. “We aren’t changing the environment by grazing these lands with cattle. The difference is that we’re actually doing a better job with managed grazing, because we can control the cattle’s impact on the vegetation as opposed to the unmanaged wildlife herds.”

Delfino maintains that these grazing benefits don’t apply equally to all grasslands, “but for the areas covered by the California Rangeland Resolution, cattle grazing is the best management tool.”

while county tax bases are maintained and rural economies continue to be supported.”

He recently placed 138 acres of his Sunol, Calif., ranch in a habitat easement, which generated \$985,500 in proceeds. While it may sound like a hefty sum, after he paid \$567,000 in estate taxes and \$233,000 in capital gains, he was left with far less than the land’s market value — especially when you consider that the 5-acre ranchettes bordering his fenceline sell for upward of \$1 million each.

With land prices like that, Koopman could have sold that 138-acre parcel into development for more than \$45 million, but his desire to keep the land in family agriculture was stronger than the pull of a few dollars, even if it was millions.

Unfortunately, numerous circumstances often prevent ranchers from resisting the temptation to sell their land, especially when conservation program payments don’t come close to matching the pocketbook potential of developers, Koopman says. That’s why the resolution signatories are working to improve conservation easement programs by excluding capital gains taxes, making easements a more economically viable alternative for private landowners.

“We need to make these easement programs more financially attractive,” Delfino says. “After all, if we can’t keep these ranches operational, we’re going to wind up with ranchettes.”

Changing perceptions

Cattlemen aren’t traditionally seen as conservationists, Delfino says, but that image is changing — and it’s changing for good reason.

“Cattlemen and women are great stewards of the land, and more and more that story is getting out to the public and environmental community,” she says. “Defenders of Wildlife and the other organizations that are a part of this resolution are working to try to educate our members about that changing image.”

Koopman says that the agricultural community has easily been ignored by the public. “They haven’t noticed our history of conservation because we haven’t been telling them about it,” he says. “We haven’t tooted our own horn and told the public about the great things that we do every single day for the land and the environment.

“I’m proud of what I do for a living, and I think the entire ranching community does a pretty good job of being stewards of the land,” he continues. “We just need to tell everybody else about it.”

Members of the resolution are quickly learning that not only do they need to do a

better job of telling the story to the public, but they need to become better communicators with each other.

“The groups that we’ve partnered with are traditionally groups that we’ve had conflicts with, so first we have to establish a working level of trust with them,” says Kevin Kester, a member of CCA’s board of directors. Kester has a cow-calf and stocker operation near Parkfield, Calif. “We’re learning that for cattlemen and environmentalists to have a

better relationship, it needs to start with one-on-one communication.

“By building partnerships and trust with these environmental organizations, we’re setting ourselves up to at least have a better chance in the future of having a meaningful conversation with them when we have to deal with other issues we don’t agree on,” he continues. “It’s very beneficial in the long run for the cattle industry to have these types of relationships.”

