

A New Way

A Ranch Protected by a Protected Bird

Hafenfeld Ranch

Bruce and Sylvia Hafenfeld
Eric and Jamie Hafenfeld - Weldon

Bruce and his son Eric working alongside each other on the ranch.



In the Kern River Valley, not far from the cowboy town of Bakersfield, a rancher looked through a new set of lenses. The environmental movement created the Endangered Species Act (ESA), which many on the ground are fearful will put them out of business. However, this California rancher used the ESA to preserve his ranch and livelihood.

Bruce and Sylvia Hafenfeld of Hafenfeld Ranch in Weldon run a cattle operation on private land, U.S. Forest Service permits and an Audubon California preserve. This ranching operation has been in existence for more than a century in the southern Sierra Nevada mountain range.

The Hafenfelds have watched the valley they live in transition over the years. Sylvia, who was born and raised here, saw the Kern River dammed, creating the Lake Isabella Reservoir that provides water for families and farmers in the Central Valley. With the lake also came tourist and vacation homes, forever changing the area.

More recently, they watched their neighbors change from ranchers to government agencies, mitigation companies and environmental organizations, all because the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) needed to fulfill its ESA mitigation requirements for the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher.

Taking a step back, when the Corps created Lake Isabella, they also created habitat for the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, a bird listed as endangered under the ESA. The Corps, in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), designated the land around the lake as a wildlife preserve. The willows that provided habitat for the flycatcher were flooded under the Corps' management of the lake, resulting in the loss of flycatcher nests and a subsequent decline in the number of birds in the area.

To ensure the long-term survival of the species in the Kern River Valley, USFWS required the Corps, under a Biological Opinion required by the ESA, to acquire and protect (mitigate) 1,120 acres of riparian habitat.

As the Hafenfelds had watched the Kern River Valley transition with the creation of the lake, they were set to watch it transition again as

century-old ranching operations were slated to turn over to mitigation habitat.

Not willing to lose the family tradition that was already in the eyes of his son Eric, who was working alongside his father, Bruce looked for a new way to save the ranch.

“We were not willing to sell the place to a conservation organization or the government to protect habitat for the bird,” states Bruce. “Our family has been providing habitat for the species through our ranching activities for decades, and my son wants to continue this tradition.”

Not willing to lose the family tradition

The Corps had set aside funds to acquire flycatcher habitat (mostly ranches) along the Kern River. At the same time, USFWS had designated most of the area as critical habitat under the ESA.

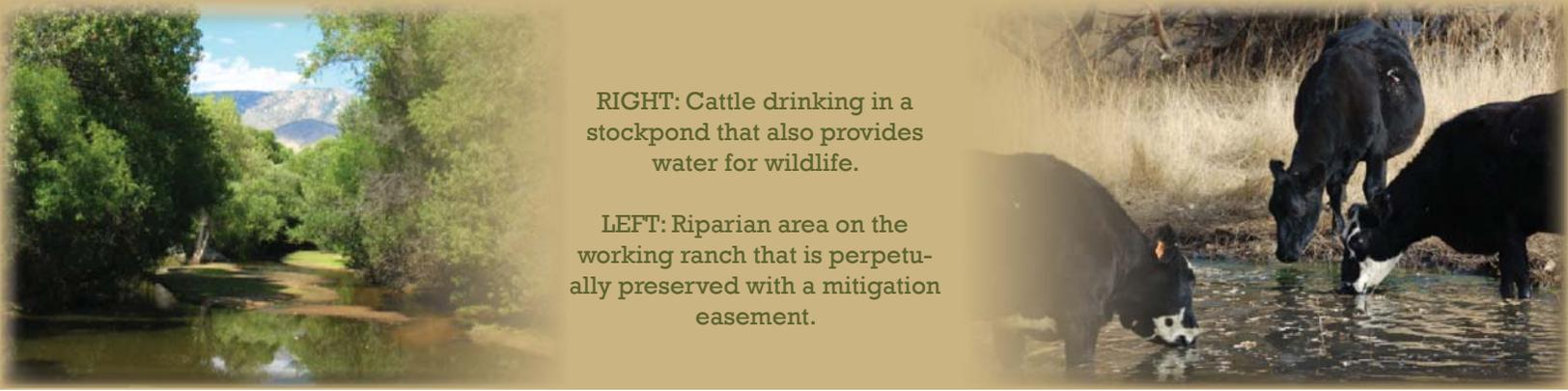
“Right about then, I was fearful that I would lose my water rights and my hands would be tied, unable to continue ranching,” reflects Bruce. “We ranchers are a benefit to the bird and not a threat, so I knew there had to be an alternative to selling out.”

Attending meeting after meeting, the Hafenfelds finally found a glimmer of hope when the USFWS regional manager at the time, Steve Thompson, sent staff from Sacramento to Bruce's ranch.

Over 350 miles away from her cubicle, a biologist saw firsthand how a cowboy believed that conservation easements could be an alternative to outright property purchases to preserve a species with a declining population. What the biologist saw on the ground that day at the Hafenfelds was a ranch that had been legally diverting water from the Kern River since 1863.

This diversion was the principal contributor to the ranch's economic viability and the sole provider of the habitat for the flycatcher. The water that is used on the ranch to irrigate pastures travels through 2.7 miles of ditches before it is utilized and spread across a field to grow forage for cattle. In transport, 60 percent of the water is absorbed by the willows, creating riparian habitat that is home to flycatchers. These riparian corridors, which are sustained through the Hafenfelds' management practices, support contiguous habitat that is prime breeding ground for the species.

Southwestern Willow Flycatcher



RIGHT: Cattle drinking in a stockpond that also provides water for wildlife.

LEFT: Riparian area on the working ranch that is perpetually preserved with a mitigation easement.

Seeing for USFWS’ “own eyes” how the habitat for the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher in the Kern River Valley was created and maintained provided enough evidence for them to change the Biological Opinion to allow for a conservation easement as an alternative to outright acquisition.

“This was a key decision that has allowed the Service to meet the legal requirements for the protection of an endangered species while opening the door to collaboration with the ranching community,” recalls Thompson. “This project exemplifies looking beyond traditional measures to preserve wildlife by viewing private landowners as an integral component.”

With a conservation easement on the property, the Hafenfeld ranch will forever provide habitat for the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher and other species such as turtles, birds and butterflies. In the Hafenfelds’ eyes, the ESA is protecting their ranching operation and family heritage.

The mitigation on the Hafenfelds’ property only covered a portion of the ranch. Working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) through the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program, additional ranch acres were perpetually placed under conservation easement, expanding the scope of habitat preserved for the flycatcher and other plants and wildlife.

This success story did not happen overnight, and began with the commitment of a rancher who wanted to ensure his property forever remained open and that an endangered species was not going to put him out of business. In the end, all the meetings and phone calls finally paid off when the California Rangeland Trust recorded the easement.

The California Rangeland Trust will now annually monitor the terms of the agreement, ensuring the continuation of a harmonious relationship between the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher and the ranching operation.

The Hafenfelds’ conservation ethic and habitat management for the flycatcher expand beyond the property lines. Annually, Hafenfeld cattle graze the Audubon Kern River Preserve that is adjacent to the ranch. The managed cattle grazing takes place in the open meadows and in the riparian areas, promoting habitat for a vast array of plants and wildlife.

“Bruce and his family are great neighbors with a diversity of skill sets and capacity that help me improve diversity on the preserve,” notes Reed Toffelson, preserve manager of Audubon Kern River Preserve. “In a given year, we work with Bruce on grazing 50-60 percent of the preserve during a six-month period.”

When the cattle graze in the riparian areas, it is specifically timed so they will not inadvertently knock a flycatcher nest out of a tree. Having the cattle graze the riparian areas on the preserve has also helped prevent a thatch buildup that would prohibit new plant growth. Therefore, grazing promotes a mixed understory that is conducive to the endangered bird and favorable to a variety of other species in the valley.

Research has proven time and again that working ranches are home to an abundant diversity of plants and wildlife, and that the management undertaken by families like the Hafenfelds actually promotes and protects these species. When combining these two schools of thought, one realizes there are tremendous mitigation opportunities available in the state to protect endangered species and ranchers simultaneously, if only people are willing to take the time to see the land and be willing to collaborate for conservation.

