

California Rangeland Conservation Coalition

Cooperatively Conserving California's Rangelands

by Sheila Barry, Tracy Schohr and Karen Sweet

A ranch in the San Francisco Bay Area was the backdrop for a meeting between environmentalists, ranchers and resource professionals from federal and state agencies. At this meeting of former foes in the summer of 2005, participants drafted a resolution documenting common ground for the conservation of the rangeland encircling the Central Valley, including the Sierra foothills and interior coast ranges. The California Rangeland Resolution (page 30) recognizes that the health of these rangelands and the diversity of species they support are largely due to grazing and other land stewardship practices of the ranchers who own and manage them.

The resolution is signed by agricultural organizations and environmental interest groups, as well as local, state and federal agencies. Together, these signatories form the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition. Rangeland Coalition members have pledged to work together to preserve and enhance California's rangeland for species of special concern, while supporting the long-term viability of the ranching industry.

Partners outlined a strategic plan that lays the foundation for Rangeland Coalition members to work together to acquire additional federal funding for conservation programs, coordinate permitting processes, garner support for cooperative conservation projects, fill gaps in research, play a role in the legislative process and provide landowner assurances and incentives for voluntary conservation. The Rangeland Coalition has prioritized implementing on-the-ground enhancement projects and coordinating voluntary conservation easements on private rangeland by working with willing landowners.

The value of grazing and other land stewardship practices undertaken by California's ranchers is being increasingly acknowledged, not only as preferred land use, but also as an essential resource management tool. Recent published studies on rangelands throughout California have documented the positive impact of grazing on habitats of several

Steve Thompson, past regional director for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service speaking at the initial gathering.

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An image clearly depicting the conversion of rangeland in California

species of special concern.

In California's Southern San Joaquin Valley, preliminary research indicates that populations of Giant Kangaroo Rats, San Joaquin Kangaroo Rats, San Joaquin Antelope Squirrels and blunt-nosed Leopard Lizards – all listed as threatened or endangered – are affected negatively by thick ground cover. The research acknowledges

“The simple fact is that the only practical way we will retain sufficient habitat for the rangeland wildlife of this state is through the maintenance of viable cattle ranching operations”

- Ed Pandolfino, conservation chair,
Sierra Foothills Audubon Chapter

that although grazing may have originally contributed to the introduction of non-native plants, moderate to heavy grazing by livestock currently may be the best way to manage habitats for these small vertebrates.

Similar benefits from grazing have been found in controlling non-native annual species in serpentine sites. The endangered Bay Checkerspot Butterfly in south San Jose was extirpated following the exclusion of cattle grazing, while nearby populations under continued grazing did not decline. Bay Area commuter car emissions enrich the nutrient-poor serpentine soils that sustain native grasses, allowing invasive weeds to flourish. Managed grazing controls invasive weeds, allowing native plants the butterfly depends upon to more successfully compete for survival.

In California's Central Valley, research has found that grazing main-

“We have a common threat, and that is the conversion of ranchland to homes and strip malls and sprawl.”

- Kim Delfino, California program director for Defenders of Wildlife



Partners photographed outside of the Defenders of Wildlife headquarters during the Rangeland Coalition annual lobbying trip to Washington, D.C.

Back Row L-R: Tim Koopmann, rancher, Sunol; Mark Kramer, The Nature Conservancy, Oakland; Nita Vail, California Rangeland Trust, Sacramento; Matt Byrne, California Cattlemen's Association, Sacramento; Darrell Wood, rancher, Vina; Judy and John Ahmann, ranchers, Napa.

Front Row L-R: Kevin Kester, rancher, Parkfield; Kim Delfino, Defenders of Wildlife, Sacramento; Karen and Darrel Sweet, ranchers, Livermore; and Bruce Hafenfeld, rancher, Weldon.

tained native plant and invertebrate diversity in ephemeral wetlands or vernal pools. When cattle were excluded, non-native annual species invaded these habitats, reducing native plant cover and wetland inundation periods. The inundation period of pools is critical; shorter inundation periods make it difficult for some vernal pool endemic species to complete their life cycle.

“The protection of our state’s most valuable natural resources is highly dependent on working partnerships between conservation interests and landowners”

- Mark Nelson, rancher

The message that grazing can benefit habitat on California’s rangelands has been heard beyond the conservation research community, and is even impacting conservation regulations. The federal listings of two species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in California contain the 4d rule. The 4d rule exempts routine ranching practices

from the prohibitions of the ESA, including taking, harming and harassing listed species. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has recognized that ranching activities including grazing and maintenance of stockponds benefit the California Red-Legged Frog and the California Tiger Salamander.

For additional information on the Rangeland Coalition, partners, and research cited in this article, please visit www.carangeland.org.

Example of Partner Diversity

- The Nature Conservancy
- California Cattlemen’s Association
- Defenders of Wildlife
- University of California
- The Environmental Defense Fund
- California Farm Bureau Federation
- Sierra Foothills Audubon Society
- San Joaquin et al
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- East Bay Regional Park District
- California Department of Fish and Game
- California Council of Land Trusts
- Humboldt State University Rangeland Resources
- Institute for Ecological Health

California Rangeland Resolution

Over 100 entities have voluntarily signed on to the California Rangeland Resolution, recognizing 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;
- Educating the public about the benefits of grazing and ranching in these rangelands.