

# A Family Affair

## Improved and Preserved Rangelands

### Yolo Land and Cattle Company

#### Hank and Suzanne Stone, Scott and Karen Stone and Casey and Angela Stone - Woodland



Scott, Karen, Hank, Angela and Casey accepting their award as the 2007 National Environmental Stewardship Award Program winner.

If you strain your eyes, you can see the western hills of Yolo County during the day from Sacramento. Dark at night, these hills will never be filled with glimmering street lights because of the commitment of one ranching family. Hank and Suzanne Stone, owners of Yolo Land and Cattle Company, along with their sons, Scott and Casey, and their wives, Karen and Angela, have made a lifelong commitment to ranching.

The ranch headquarters sit at 300 feet, while the highest point is nearly 2,300 feet in the Blue Ridge Mountains of the California Interior Coast Range. The ranch is a mix of Blue Oak woodland savannahs and annual grasslands. On the ranch, there are a number of large stockponds that serve as watering sources for cattle and wildlife during the hot, dry summers. There are also perennial and ephemeral streams, along with natural springs, scattered throughout the property.

On this ranch you can find a number of tree species, including Blue Oak, Interior Live Oak, Mexican Elderberry and Fremont Cottonwoods. You will also notice wildlife such as mountain lions, bobcats, California Valley Quail, the threatened Swainson's Hawk and a number of other grassland birds and raptors. In the grasslands, you can spot annual species such as soft chess, filaree and native stands of California onion grass, creeping wild rye and foothill needle grass.

This multi-generational ranching family has preserved the natural beauty, economic productivity and

wildlife habitat on their 7,500-acre ranch through a conservation easement. With a location in close proximity to both San Francisco and Sacramento, the demand to convert this ranch to ranchettes, condos or a golf course was continuously increasing.

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County held by the California Rangeland Trust. This easement to preserve working landscapes and wildlife habitat was made possible by public funding from the Wildlife Conservation Board and private funds from the Packard Foundation.

The easement is monitored annually to ensure compliance with terms of funding and the recorded deed on the property. This piece of land will be managed as a beef cattle operation and will continue to provide conservation values for generations to come. If this land was purchased by the government to preserve these natural

resources, the public would bear the management burden. With a conservation easement, the Stones are responsible for managing the property and continue to pay taxes on the land to support the local government.

"The easiest way for our family to ensure the ranch would remain a ranch in perpetuity was with a conservation easement," states Hank. "It was a business decision that fits into the bigger picture of projects taking place on the ranch."

For more than a quarter of a century, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) has been implementing a vast array of projects and prescribing management practices for Yolo Land and Cattle. The Stones have utilized the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), Conservation Security Program (today known as the Conservation Stewardship Program), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program and the renowned Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

These programs help the Stones, along with other farmers and ranchers, address resource concerns on private working landscapes. The programs are voluntary and are based on a cost-share system, meaning that the Stones receive some public funding to complete a project, but they also have a private financial interest in the work. Program funding is authorized by Congress every five years under the Farm Bill.

"The Stones have never been afraid to take risks, trying new projects to see what will work out on rangelands and what will not," notes Phil Hogan, Yolo County district conservationist for NRCS. "They have done everything from planting and managing

## PARTNERS

- Agricultural Research Service
- Audubon California
- CAL-FIRE
- California Rangeland Trust
- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- Packard Foundation
- Student and Landowner Education and Watershed Stewardship
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Wildlife Conservation Board
- Yolo County Resource Conservation District
- University of California, Davis



RIGHT: A wide open view on the Stone family ranch.

LEFT: A beautiful display of wildflowers on the ranch.



native grasses to restoring stock ponds and addressing erosion water quality concerns on the ranch, and are still looking to implement new projects and practices in the future.”

NRCS assisted the Stones in developing a rotational grazing plan, specifically designing appropriate pasture sizes and installing wildlife-friendly fencing material. Historically, the ranch had a set stocking rate, which is when a producer retains a certain number of cattle annually on the land, usually defined by the overall forage production.

Today, Scott and Casey have evolved their grazing management by grouping cattle in larger bunches, mimicking historic grazing regimes by native herbivores. The cattle are rotated around the ranch through the use of different fields, allowing periods of rest and recovery for grasses.

Also, the Stones’ cattle have improved the grasslands on adjacent ranches. A neighboring rancher had placed grasslands in the CRP program for over a decade, but the lack of grazing on the property had resulted in a thatch and weed buildup that was reducing biodiversity on the land. The ranch was taken out of the CRP and now the parcels on the neighboring ranch are grazed in a rotational fashion to reduce fire hazard, break up the old thatch, invigorate native grasses and reduce invasive species such as yellow star thistle that are prevalent in the area.

On the cutting edge, Yolo Land and Cattle Company is collaborating with NRCS; the University of California, Davis; Agricultural Research Service; and an environmental group, Audubon California, to quantify carbon sequestration on rangelands, using perennial grasses that have been restored through former projects. Together, partners seek to measure the amount of carbon that is stored in the roots of perennial grasses and compare that to the carbon stored in annual grasses.

“Our ultimate goal is to be able to quantify the carbon sequestration on rangelands,” states Scott. “This will allow ranchers to utilize the information so we can participate in a carbon credit system, creating a new revenue source for the ecosystem services we ranchers provide.”

In collaboration with the Audubon California Landowner Stewardship Program, NRCS, Yolo County Resource Conservation District and the Student and Landowner Education and Watershed Stewardship (SLEWS), the Stones have enhanced riparian areas on the ranch to improve water quality and wildlife habitat. Additionally, brush encroachment on grasslands was addressed through a 45,000-acre Vegetation Management Program with CAL-FIRE (California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection), covering the Stone property and 25 other landowners. Currently, Scott is working with Audubon and other ranchers to renew the contract to continue providing managed fire to restore grasslands and control invasive brush.

“The Stone family has been an incredible partner for my program, not only doing the best things for the environment, but to make their operation profitable,” states Vance Russell, program director for the Audubon California Landowner Stewardship Program. “Currently they are collaborating with Audubon on a carbon sequestration project to make ranchers money and, at the same time, help grasslands and oak woodlands.”

Not only have Hank and his family been innovative in terms of their natural resource management, they have also done the same in terms of marketing their ranch products. Yolo Land and Cattle Company markets its grassfed beef directly to consumers and also at the Davis Farmer’s Market. The family believes their sustainable land management practices are rewarded in the marketplace by consumers willing to pay a premium for their source-verified, natural, grassfed beef. You can also purchase Yolo Land and Cattle honey, bay leaves and beef jerky at local stores and on their Web site, [www.yolograssfedbeef.com](http://www.yolograssfedbeef.com).

This ranching family has been a trailblazer in finding innovative ways to expand their ranching operation while continuing to focus on natural resources. They exemplify the best of California’s many progressive cattle producers who maintain the philosophy to “take care of the land, and the land will take care of you.”

