

Grazing For Conservation

Protecting Public Watersheds

Five Dot Land and Cattle Company

Todd and Loretta Swickard - Standish



Todd and his son John Logan

Magnificent trees, clear flowing creeks and wide-open spaces coupled with a diversity of wildlife, recreationists and cattle is an impeccable description of the properties managed by the Swickard family's Five Dot Land and Cattle Company. This operation uses managed grazing to achieve myriad natural resources goals on a number of properties, with a variety of owners.

Five Dot is based in Lassen County and is the largest public lands grazing permittee in the state of California. The family ranching operation, nestled in the Willow Creek Valley northeast of Susanville, was founded in 1959 by Todd Swickard's father, Jack, when he and his wife Midge brought 200 registered Herefords from the Santa Clara Valley. Fifty years later, this same ranch is the foundation for the Swickards' grazing operation.

The Five Dot Willow Creek Valley ranch is actively managed today. A combination of permanent and temporary fencing, herding, timed grazing, off-stream water development and mineral supplement placement allows Five Dot to graze riparian areas at the most appropriate time and level of intensity.

"The most cost-effective method for enhancing water quality depends on the situation", Todd says, adding, "Over the long term, we've found that permanent fencing is the most economical solution, but with some of our public land and private leased land, it's just not an option."

A multitude of tools are utilized to ensure the natural resources are enhanced, property managers are satisfied and grazing remains economically viable.



TOP: California Poppy

BOTTOM: Signage on perimeter fence to ensure recreationist awareness of cattle.

Our public lands grazing permits are critical, we wouldn't be an economically viable operation without them

With many diverse grazed properties in the state, the greatest challenge for Five Dot is to balance the various management priorities of the public agencies and private entities they work with. Todd states, "Each land has unique needs and must be managed to enhance its respective ecological values. In doing so, the grazing terms must be workable to ensure that I can financially graze the property."

Lands grazed by Five Dot range from annual rangelands

and vernal pools in the Bay Area to mountain meadows in the Sierra Nevada and perennial rangelands in the Great Basin, creating a great diversity of ecological issues and natural resources concerns.

"On our U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) permits, we work with allotment management plans," Todd articulates. "We have management plans that guide our grazing on East Bay Municipal Utility District (MUD) and Solano Land Trust lands, and we also use management plans on the private lands we graze." All properties are managed with a rotational grazing regime, mimicking historic grazers, that has Todd has developed.

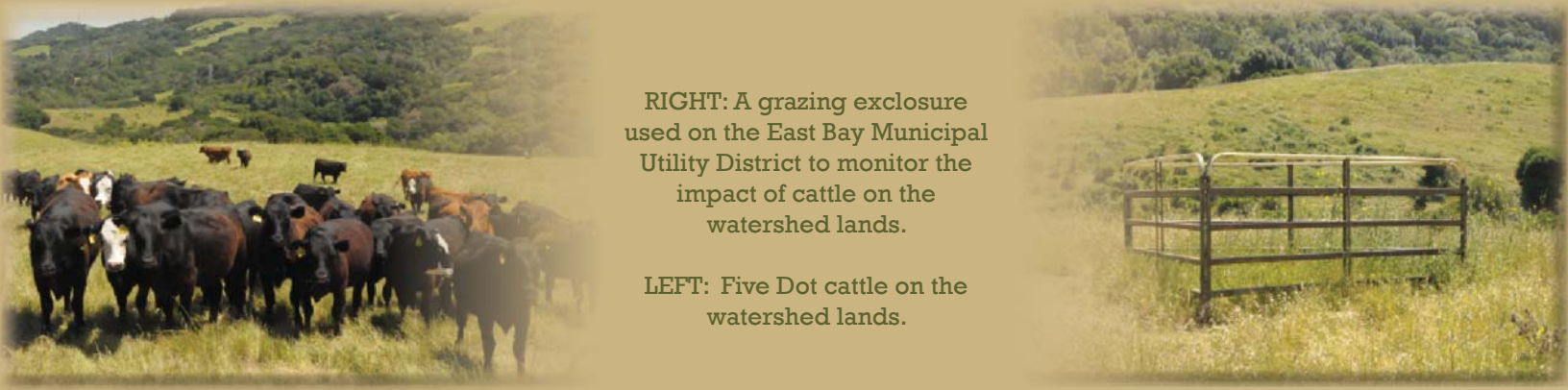
"We manage public lands for the Carson Wandering Skipper, bald eagles, tiger salamanders and red-legged frogs, just to name a few," notes Todd. Government and state agencies, he feels, are beginning to appreciate the benefits of controlled grazing in managing the habitats of these and other species. "They're finding more of these species of concern where we've practiced controlled grazing."

Livestock grazing is the primary tool utilized on East Bay MUD-owned watershed lands to manage vegetation to meet goals for fire protection/fuel load management, water quality and biodiversity. Over the years, the grazing program has evolved from maximizing the economic benefit for the East Bay MUD, to protecting the resources and water quality.

"The Five Dot operation has been very cooperative in moving cattle to meet our management objectives," states Rodd Trip range supervisor for East Bay MUD. "We have taken multiple groups that are pessimistic about cattle grazing to see where Five Dot cattle have helped us meet our needs in promoting native grasses and controlling invasive species."

Like Five Dot's management, their monitoring programs vary with the ownership of the land they manage. "We're constantly monitoring grazing utilization and the health of the land visually," says Todd.

On Forest Service lands, Five Dot measures streambank stability,



RIGHT: A grazing enclosure used on the East Bay Municipal Utility District to monitor the impact of cattle on the watershed lands.

LEFT: Five Dot cattle on the watershed lands.



stubble height and utilization of woody vegetation (especially aspens and willows). On BLM lands surrounding Eagle Lake in Lassen County, Todd works with the agency to monitor water quality.

On the annual rangelands Todd manages, he measures residual dry matter (the amount of grass left after the grazing season). “Sometimes we work with the agencies to monitor our grazing, sometimes we do it on our own,” Todd explains. “We’re all starting to realize that managed grazing is critical to the long-term health of rangelands and that monitoring is the key to documenting our success.”

In an effort to improve riparian habitat around a wet meadow in the Plumas National Forest where cattle tended to congregate, Trout Unlimited, University of California Cooperative Extension, the Forest Service and Five Dot joined together in a partnership called “Cowboy Unite” to develop a comprehensive solution. To enhance the health of the watershed and ensure cattle utilized the entire property, structural enhancements were made and revolutionary cattle herding techniques were employed.

To document success, photo and annual use monitoring were conducted. “After three years, this project turned out to be a win-win for everyone,” comments Todd. “The improved health of the riparian area has benefited wildlife habitat, soil stability and water quality, while the improved distribution of livestock actually increased the amount of harvestable forage on the pasture and reduced our operation costs.”

Most recently, Five Dot has started to market their beef directly to consumers. “Eventually, we hope to market all of our production this way,” explains Todd. Although he admits that direct marketing will potentially improve their bottom line, it poses an entirely new set of challenges. “We have to do everything, from production to

processing to marketing.”

The sale of excess hay off the Willow Creek Valley Ranch and direct marketing are just two ways Five Dot looks to diversify their operation and make their business economically viable. “We also offer hunting and fly fishing,” notes Todd, explaining that the economics of the cattle business in California are driving ranchers to diversify. “Everything costs more in California,” he says, “From the expense of complying with regulations, to the price of fuel.”

Todd concludes any conversation about Five Dot by stating, “Our public lands grazing permits are critical – we wouldn’t be an economically viable operation without them.”

The ability for property managers and grazing operators to establish partnerships that are mutually beneficial is the foundation for success. Managed grazing can enhance the ecological values on landscapes throughout the state and ensure the economic viability of ranching. These partnerships are continuing to evolve, expand and develop through the creation of new grazing methods, monitoring results and the availability of research.

Ranching operations in California, like Five Dot, are excited about the opportunities to work with a variety of property owners around the state to achieve natural resources goals with cattle.

