

# A Balancing Act

## Working with Economic, Environmental and Social Values

### Work Ranch

### George and Elaine Work - San Miguel

All you can hear is a distant moo and sounds of wildlife as you look across vast acres of rolling grasslands and hillsides covered with Blue Oak Trees. In Monterey County, about 20 miles off Highway 101 northeast of San Miguel, you'll find a ranch that hosts everything from wildlife to city slickers.

George and Elaine Work are progressive ranchers who have a strong love for the land and are on a quest to be better stewards of their cattle ranch. This pair also has strong ties to people – everyone from their neighbors to a variety of ranch guests.

“The most important ‘crop’ we produce is our relationships, not only with the land, but with others,” explains George, “be they family, guests, urban environmentalists – and the list goes on.”

The ranch hosts everything from workshops for fellow cattlemen and urbanites to demonstrate ranching’s ecological benefits and managed grazing first-hand to weekender couples strengthening their marriage vows and communication skills. The ability to host guests on their ranch was made legal through 1998 legislation the Works were instrumental in getting passed – the Farm Stay Program.

The hunting and guest ranch concept was implemented to help diversify and strengthen the ranch’s economic viability. Guests, particularly hunters, make up nearly 30 percent of the income derived off the ranch in a given year. Working with the California Department of Fish and Game’s Private Lands Management program, the Works have a small hunt club and offer guided hunts for pigs, Tule Elk and deer.

George is also a lifelong learner, improving his ranching skills through workshops, trainings and collaborative research endeavors.

## PARTNERS

- Bureau of Land Management
- Ducks Unlimited
- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

“We all have a purpose-driven life. One of my purposes is to find and share good information,” states George.

“So what drives me to go to meeting after meeting is that I will get some good information, stuff to think about and I can help others in the process.”

In the mid-1980’s, George attended a five-day school in Holistic Management™. He describes Holistic Management as a goal-orientated, value-driven thought process utilizing guidelines

that cause decisions to be made that are environmentally, financially and socially sound. Holistic Management has had a tremendous impact on the Work Ranch.

“When I came home after being exposed to the class, it was like I had bought a new ranch. I was seeing things that I had never seen before or had just not thought about,” recalls George. “I am still using the principles that I learned at the workshop today. It has been a valuable tool for my family and the ranch.”

It goes beyond training to implementation on the Work Ranch. George is a firm believer that “If you want something on the land to change, then you have to change how people make decisions - and that is not easy.”

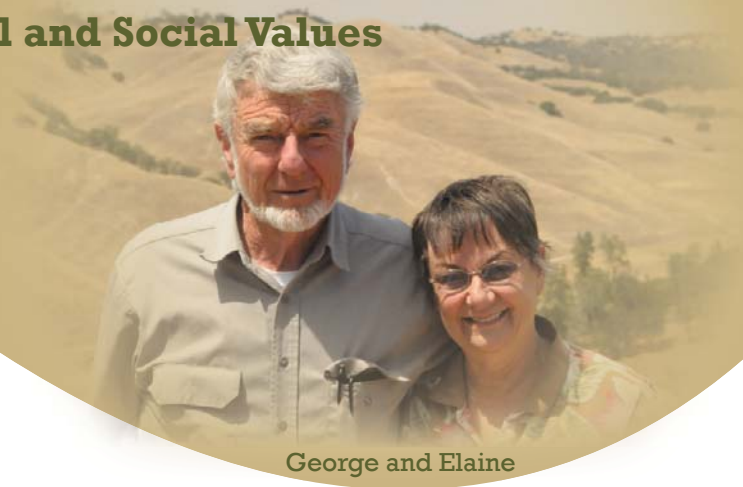
This 12,000-acre ranch is divided into 50 pastures, with more pastures planned in the future. The pastures allow George to better manage the cattle and grass on the ranch. With the recognition that he is a grass farmer and not just a cattle producer, he strives to increase grass production to provide for improved beef and wildlife production on the land, also improving ranch aesthetics in the process.

George has enhanced his ranch by installing cross-fencing to create additional pastures and through water infrastructure development. In this arid region of the state, water is a scarce resource for both livestock and wildlife. Over a decade ago, George noticed the challenges grasslands birds and wildlife faced when drinking out of traditional cattle watering troughs.

It started with placing concrete boards to create a ramp into and out of conventional livestock watering troughs. These concrete boards are 2 inches thick, 12 inches wide and 6 feet long with rebar sticking out of one end that hooks over the edge of the trough to hold the ramp in place.

The wildlife-friendly drinking ramps were a predecessor to the innovative ground-level water troughs that Work has since created.

“The key aspect we examined was water should be on the ground,” states George. “The Creator put it there and we raised it 30 inches



George and Elaine



RIGHT: Cow and calf on the range.

LEFT: George kneeling next to a ground-level watering trough on his ranch.



with a standard trough design which makes it inaccessible to most wildlife.”

To date, the Works have installed five ground-level watering troughs and are in the process of installing them at additional sites on the ranch. These new watering sources are maintained year-round to provide water for wildlife and cattle. Monitoring on the ground-level water troughs has shown utilization by everything from lizards and raccoons to mountain lions and deer.

“A stewardship highlight for me is when I see a neighbor like Mitch Roth and son Garrett convert almost all of their watering points on their ranch to ground-level watering troughs,” states George.

The third wildlife watering source on the Work ranch are quail guzzlers, which are filled by rain water. George’s father worked with the California Department of Fish and Game to install secure, predator-detering, dependable watering structures in the 1950s on the ranch. These structures have been maintained by the family for half a century and are believed to be some of the first conservation practices put into place on the ranch, serving as the foundation of George’s conservation ethic.

George says one of the new concepts he is very excited about combines Fred Provenza’s work at Utah State University on livestock foraging behavior, including how to train livestock to eat nutritious weeds they normally would not eat. He couples this with Bud Williams’ low-stress herding techniques, which train cattle to stay in a herd and stay in a location for a day or more without fences, only leaving a location for water and then returning promptly.

“Together, these two management practices protect and enhance riparian areas without fencing. In addition, these techniques allow

cattle to be used as a valuable tool for prescriptive grazing, greatly improving rangeland health, reducing invasive species, controlling fuel load and removing fire hazards,” explains George. “We have also used cattle to crush brush and to heal erosion cuts.”

George’s passion for learning and sharing land stewardship is shown by his active involvement in several groups. One is the Central Coast Rangeland Coalition, a cooperative research project working to identify the indicators of rangeland health, made up of over 40 ranchers in California’s coastal region. George is also a founding member of the Rancher Self Assessment Project, which provides a method for individuals to evaluate how sustainable their ranch management decisions are.

In an attempt to meet the challenges of marketing local meat, George and a group of Central Coast ranchers were able to obtain a mobile, U.S. Department of Agriculture-inspected livestock processing plant. This unit provides an opportunity for producers to supply the niche market of grassfed meats.

The processing plant endeavor aligns with George’s work on the Roots of Change Stewardship Council. This is a collaborative group in pursuit of a sustainable food system in California by the year 2030.

In the end, the Work family is happy to steward California’s grasslands, showing that they can be managed for economic and ecological good. This third generation ranch is currently in transition to the fourth and fifth generations, with future plans including a conservation easement through the California Rangeland Trust.

George concludes, “As ranchers, we are miles ahead of where we were a few years ago, because of the collaborative initiatives that are ongoing.”

