

Monitoring for Success

One rancher's approach to managed grazing

T.O. Cattle Company

Joe and Julie Morris - San Juan Bautista



Joe and Julie with their children, Jack and Sarah.

A string of Ford Fusion Hybrids displaying bumper stickers (“I am Changing the Climate”) and convertible BMWs lined a country lane in San Juan Bautista on a beautiful spring day. Bay Area residents had driven south for the annual spring field day at the T.O. Cattle Company. These conservation-minded urban dwellers had come to see firsthand how the Morris Grassfed Beef® they eat back in the city is raised.

Joe and Julie Morris of T.O. Cattle Company, based in San Benito County, manage thousands of acres of coastal grasslands and oak woodland savannahs. Their ranching career began in 1991, continuing the tradition of Joe’s grandfather, John J. Baumgartner, who came to San Benito County to ranch in 1927. The Morris family cattle operation sells nearly 200 head directly to consumers through their beef company each year. The foundation of T.O. Cattle Company is centered on beef production, healthy watersheds and consumer awareness.

“We are doing some things differently and better, and others the same way we have done them in the past. We are taking advantage of information that my granddad never had,” states Joe when discussing how the management regime on the property evolved under his direction.

To begin with, the Morrises use Holistic Management™, a decision-making process developed by Allan Savory. In regard to their operation, the Morrises use the decision-making process to make grazing, land management and financial decisions that improve land health and productivity and move them toward their holistic goal. A component of this plan is to manage cattle to mimic the historic patterns of elk and bison that once grazed California grasslands.

Specifically, Joe works to prevent the cattle from overgrazing, which occurs when a herbivore bites a plant a second time before that plant has had sufficient time to recover its root mass. Joe manages overgrazing by moving the herd of animals according to the needs of the plants they will graze. The Morrises implement their grazing plan by herding, subdividing pastures with electric fencing to control livestock distribution and developing water infrastructure that can be used by cattle and wildlife.

Monitoring evaluates the overall grassland health, including plant biodiversity, wildlife presence and water quality

The most important component to any grazing operation is the rancher, of course – the one who monitors the cattle, grass and water, and moves the

cattle around the property. Joe is a firm believer and a case study that only overgrazing, not grazing itself, is damaging. On Joe’s property you will find native plants, invasive species under control and a diversity of plants and wildlife coexisting in harmony with the cattle.

To find out more about the health of the grassland they were grazing, Joe and his dad, Rich, decided it would be worthwhile to bring together other ranchers, range science experts, representatives of conservation organizations and government staff from natural resources agencies to discuss the topic. They recognized that there was a great deal of conflict over the management of grasslands, and they wanted to see if they could develop a shared understanding of what constitutes and what produces healthy rangelands.

They gathered those groups to see if they could discover common ground, eventually creating the Central Coast Rangeland Coalition (CCRC). One of the group’s projects is the development of a monitoring program, a peer-reviewed standard of rangeland/watershed health, applicable to California’s Central Coast. The basis of the program is the 1994 publication of the National Academy of Science’s “Rangeland Health: New Methods to Classify, Inventory, and Monitor Rangelands.”

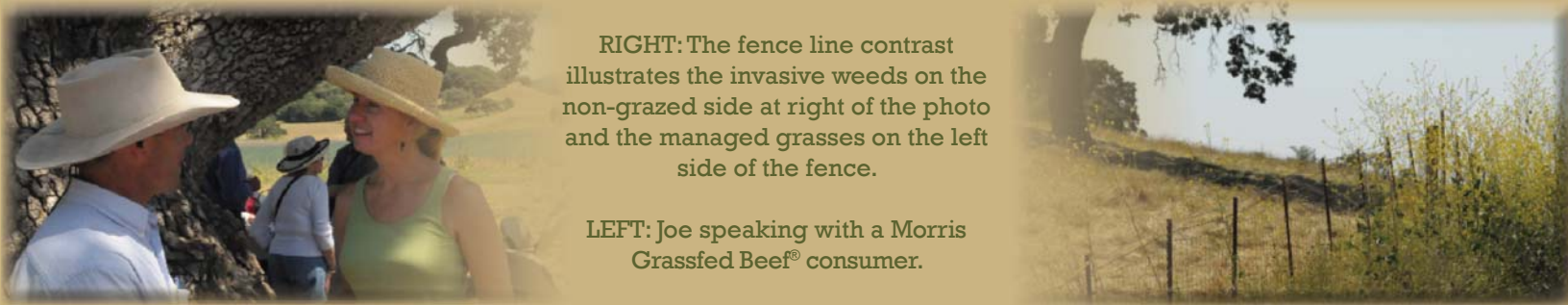
“The project is directed at defining and identifying sites of healthy coastal grasslands, and at developing workable ‘Standards of Rangeland Health’ to assist land managers in choosing and evaluating their practices,”

states Rich, a primary CCRC facilitator, who works closely with Joe and Julie on the T.O. Cattle Company’s range management. “We, along with 25 other ranchers managing about 200,000 acres from Sonoma County to San Luis Obispo County, are voluntarily participating in the annual CCRC monitoring program to evaluate the health of the rangelands and to determine if we can improve our management and develop region-wide indicators of rangeland health.”

Between Holistic Management and the CCRC, the Morrises are promoting a healthy watershed. At the same time, Joe proclaims that, because of Holistic Management, not only has the productivity of his ranch improved, but he has also seen an increase in profits. Joe is excited to be part of the creation of the coastal grasslands ‘Standards of Rangeland Health’ so he and his ranching neighbors can be better stewards of the animals, air, water and soil they have influence over.

RESOURCES

- www.morrisgrassfed.com
- www.holisticmanagement.org



RIGHT: The fence line contrast illustrates the invasive weeds on the non-grazed side at right of the photo and the managed grasses on the left side of the fence.

LEFT: Joe speaking with a Morris Grassfed Beef® consumer.

On these California coastal grasslands, Morris' cattle eat a diet of fresh grass, forbs and legumes. In June, the animals are harvested and sold to more than 500 customers directly as Morris Grassfed Beef. The family has expanded their sales during the summers by attending the farmers' markets in Hollister and Santa Cruz.

"We are a grassfed operation. This does not mean the commodity market is bad, we are just taking a different path," explains Joe. "Direct marketing affords us the opportunity to educate our consumers on where and how their beef is raised, while receiving a premium in the marketplace."

The conservation-minded urbanites who drove their hybrids to the T.O. Cattle Company for the annual spring field day are consumers of Morris Grassfed Beef because of their concerns about healthy food, local ranching communities, climate change, clean water, open space and a healthy environment.

"We were influenced by books and the media about purchasing local, environmentally-friendly foods," notes Mimi, an Oakland resident who purchases Morris Grassfed Beef. "The field day was a great chance to meet the people who raise our food, see how the cattle are important for the state's grasslands and have a good time on the ranch."

The Morris family takes consumer and general public education on beef production very seriously, hosting field days, publishing newsletters and even maintaining a company Facebook® page. With 99 percent of the population unfamiliar with how beef is produced and what role ranching plays in preserving open spaces, providing income for rural economies and promoting an ecologically diverse environment, the primary goal for their community outreach is education.

In terms of monitoring data, Joe and Julie have continued to evolve their operation, implementing emerging ecological and economic approaches. Using the program set up by CCRC, the annual monitoring is conducted by both the rancher and outside rangeland

experts. The monitoring evaluates the overall grassland health, including plant biodiversity, wildlife presence and water quality.

Putting the data to use, they have trained their cattle to eat invasive weeds such as milk thistle and black mustard, allowing better utilization of forage that was historically neglected. At the same time, once overwhelming tap-rooted forbs on portions of the ranch have returned to historic grassland levels through planned grazing and close monitoring of the cattle.

The Morris family's future includes continued growth of the operation, helping to create a more cattle production-savvy public and implementing additional emerging ecological and economic approaches. One of those emerging issues for all ranchers is the ability to sequester carbon.

"With cows and grass, you have the tools to manipulate the process of photosynthesis. We are the custodians of that process, and we can manage it to sequester carbon on millions of acres in California," says Joe. "Ranchers are on the front line to participate in a voluntary carbon market, potentially providing additional revenue and protecting open grasslands that are home to a diversity of plants and wildlife."

This is just one more thing that will attract the conservation-minded public to purchase California beef and support the state's cattle producers.

