

# A Coalition of the Willing

*California ranchers and enviros are on the same side. By Tracy Schohr*

**S**tranger than fiction: in California, environmentalists, agency staff and cattlemen are advocating the benefits of managed grazing. Yes, in the nation's most populous state, there is at last official recognition that rangelands, and the abundance of wildlife and plant species that rely on them, largely persist today due to ranchers who have owned and managed these lands for generations.

In a state with over 24 million acres of privately grazed rangeland and a population of 36 million and growing, rangeland has been under threat in California for years. But united by concern over California's disappearing grasslands, conservationists representing some of the state's most ardent environmental organizations have joined with the Califor-

nia Cattlemen's Association (CCA) and its members to protect both the state's natural resources and working ranches.

The threat of explosive tract-housing development was a leading factor in bringing all the parties together. But what made allies of former adversaries was an array of scientific research conducted on ranches in regions of the state that proved how managed grazing benefits nearly all species of grassland birds, most native plants and threatened vernal-pool species. Pelayo Alvarez, with Defenders of Wildlife, notes that such research shows species ranging from the California tiger salamander to Swainson's hawk and California red-legged frogs all benefit from grazing. "There are also instances," Alvarez says, "where actively managed grazing has reduced

invasive species and weeds that negatively impact cattle forage, create less desired habitat for wildlife and choke out native plants. When it comes to invasive-species control, grazing can be a double-edged sword. Overgrazing can increase invasive species but when its use is based on science, it can be a very effective tool."

In California's Central Valley, research conducted by Jaymee Marty of The Nature Conservancy found that livestock grazing maintained native plant and invertebrate diversity in ephemeral wetlands or vernal pools. "My research documented what vernal-pool experts have seen for decades," Marty says. "Remove grazing from vernal pools and biodiversity suffers. My work measured the extent of that impact and it was sig-



PHOTO COURTESY CCA

*This is a scene all too familiar in California—a cow grazing in a field of wildflowers with a golf course and subdivisions in the background. These ranches offer protection from development. They also offer open country and beautiful views for people and habitat for birds, mammals, and invertebrates, including burrowing owls, prairie falcons, grasshopper sparrows, western pond turtle and viola flower (a.k.a. Johnny Jump-ups). California rangelands have become the most crucial conservation priority in the state. Ranches offer open space, protection for threatened and endangered species, and domestic food production.*



Tim Koopmann's ranch near San Francisco offers habitat for numerous species of wildlife, including the endangered tiger salamander, red-legged frog and Callippe silverspot butterfly. The pond below ("probably not the prettiest pond in the world") is prime salamander habitat, which, Koopmann says, "is the most lucrative livestock that I have ever raised."



nificant. Ungrazed pools lost native plant and animal species and had less inundation during the winter."

California's Central Valley rangelands also support more bird species threatened by development than any other habitat—species including burrowing owls, prairie falcons, loggerhead shrikes and grasshopper sparrows. Combine this with the accelerated conversion of grasslands to urban or more intense agricultural uses, and a solid argument can be made that California's rangelands are the most crucial conservation priority in the state. Ed Pandolfino, conservation chairman of the Sierra Foothills Audubon Society, puts it this way: "The importance of cattle ranching to protecting this habitat goes beyond simply preventing conversion to other uses. In general, when grazers are taken off the land, grassland birds suffer. Bird species of particular conservation concern, like mountain plovers and horned larks, all prefer habitats where the grasses are kept very short. Wintering raptors cannot find their rodent prey in lands dominated by thick mats of invasive grasses or dense stands of thistle." The habitat

these species prefer comes only from grazing.

The expanding awareness among environmentalists of the benefits of grazing led to the creation of the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition (a.k.a. Rangeland Coalition) in 2005, when 12 signers resolved to protect rangelands within California's Central Valley and

interior coast ranges. The Rangeland Resolution outlined goals that included economic, environmental, political, human and social benefits that all derive from the long-term viability of private ranches and the natural-resource values they provide. To date, more than 100 organizations have voluntarily joined the Rangeland Coalition.

"The simple fact is we needed to work with [environmentalists and agency employees]. There are not very many ranchers, and in a political climate where we struggle to row our own boat, we found ourselves in constant conflict," says Bruce Hafenfeld, past president of CCA and current policy-division chairman of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association. "When we met with the agencies and the environmentalists, we found that we had a lot in common." Having environmental groups as partners is also helping to resolve two of the biggest issues for cattlemen in California—the estate tax and the California Land Conservation Act of 1965, commonly referred to as the Williamson Act.

The estate tax and its implications to pass on the family farm or ranch to the next gen-

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS OF GRAZING

### LESA OSTERHOLM RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICT

"With over 20 million acres of privately grazed land in California, we work very closely with ranchers, and have witnessed the multiple benefits and values provided by their land. The California Rangeland Conservation Coalition is a prime example of people in partnerships working together. With the increase in urban development and pressures, it's important for us to increase our understanding of the important role these ranches play in the environmental, economic, cultural and social benefits they provide."

### TIM KOOPMANN KOOPMANN RANCH

"My family got this ranch in 1918. Since that time, the growth has been just unbelievably strong. We've got a golf course on our north border; we've got ranchettes on five acres on our eastern border; and we've got a freeway on our western border. Behind me is a California tiger salamander breeding pond that the family has decided to put a conservation easement on. It's probably not the prettiest pond in the world—there's no emergent riparian vegetation around it—but the tiger salamanders, for ingress/egress and protection from predation, prefer that. Also, the cattle use it as a drinking-



water source, and occasional use by cattle causes a little turbidity in the water, which also acts to protect the tiger salamander. We made a conscious decision that we want to keep the ranch intact as it is; it's been really challenging at times, but it's been a family decision that we would like to stay here, not only to maintain the lifestyle that we've known, to grow up with and love, but also to provide the habitat values and open space that's so coveted by our urban neighbors. One of the things we've done for wildlife enhancement is we work closely with the Audubon Society, and we've got 72 nesting boxes for bluebirds here on the ranch. It's all part of the statewide western bluebird recovery plan. I take great pride in the fact that the Ohlone Audubon Society rep who monitors the boxes, in last year's report called the ranch 'a virtual bird factory.'"

**KIM DELFINO**  
**DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE**

*“Defenders of Wildlife cares very much about rangelands and the ranchers who live on those lands, because that open space benefits all of us, including California’s declining and imperiled wildlife. Keeping cows out on certain landscapes, such as vernal-pool landscapes, is of great benefit. These cows mimic the natural grazing patterns of the large elk herds that used to roam through the Central Valley. We don’t have these elk herds any longer; therefore we need the cows to be out there to keep the nonnative species down, and allow the native plants to thrive, thereby resulting in helping vernal-pool landscapes. It’s not always easy for an environmental group to partner with a rancher—sometimes we have mistrust and preconceived ideas—but after talking with these folks, I’ve come to realize that we share a love of the landscape.”*

**JOHN READER**  
**READER RANCH**

*“My brothers and I are fourth generation at this ranch, since 1854. We’ve been able to demonstrate good land stewardship for the last 150 years. We’re proud to be part of California’s agriculture, and we’re proud to be able to continue operating this cow-calf operation. It’s a tough business and no two years are the same, but we continually adjust to whatever Mother Nature brings us.”*

**ED BURTON**  
**CALIFORNIA USDA/NRCS**

*“I’ve truly enjoyed working with ranchers all of my career, probably because, as a conservationist, I truly appreciate their long-term view and commitment to conservation. Ranchers are people tied to the land, both as a part of their living and, more importantly somehow, to the very fiber of their being. It’s part of their ethic to find ways to sustain the landscape that sustains them. I’ve learned that if you can show ranchers that you can help them, be it through grazing management, or through managing for wildlife, they’ll listen—and they’ll apply good conservation, and be very successful at it. California ranchers bring a very important benefit, and that is a beautiful, open space that is both productive landscape and a healthy environment.”*

**STONE FAMILY, WOODLAND**

*“We [farm and ranch] because we love it. It’s in our blood. We’re trying to be progressive in the industries that we work in; we’re trying to be good caretakers and stewards of the land; [and] we try...to tie everything together, from producing the high-quality beef that we grow for our customers and clients, doing it in an environmentally friendly manner that sustains not only the ranches but the livestock and the wildlife and the families who work on these ranches. We’ve never really done it for the money or the glory. I think that’s probably the same for all ranchers; we’re trying to do*

PHOTO COURTESY CCA



*Chet Vogt, Three Creeks Ranch, Elk Creek, Calif., partners with California Department of Fish & Game, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Tuleyome and the University of California Cooperative Extension to manage a piece of BLM ground with grazing in Colusa County.*

eration is well-known throughout agriculture. But, for the first time in decades, ranchers have found new advocates to tell Congress the estate tax is one of the leading causes of the breakup and loss of family-owned ranching operations. Through this partnership and the sharing of firsthand horror stories, environmental partners have joined the ranching community to support permanent, targeted reform of the estate tax in ways that preserve private working ranches and support lasting rangeland conservation.

California ranchers like Tim Koopmann open up their ranches to the public, in an effort to open minds to the stark reality of the complex issues ranchers are facing to stay in business. “I was one of the ranchers who was

hit hard by the estate tax,” says Koopmann. “By my family opening up the ranch for tours, we let the public see firsthand the wildlife and native plants, along with open spaces private ranches maintain.”

The Williamson Act enables local governments to enter into contracts with landowners who restrict their parcel use to agriculture, commonly for 10-year periods. In return, landowners receive a better tax rate on their property based on agricultural value versus full market value. For more than four decades, local governments have been reimbursed for this tax credit by the state. However, in 2009, the state budget slashed funding for the program. In response, more than 40 Rangeland Coalition members rallied to help

save it, joining the CCA, California Farm Bureau Federation and Endangered Species Coalition in seeking funding, because coalition members believe that the longer-term negative impacts of cutting the program vastly outweigh the short-term budget savings that the state would receive from the elimination of the Williamson Act.

“Cattlemen, including myself, have walked the halls of Congress with the environmental community supporting estate-

PHOTO COURTESY CCA



*Rancher Bruce Hafenfeld, past president CCA, and Eric Holst of Environmental Defense Fund.*

tax reform and program changes along with increased funding to the conservation title of the 2008 Farm Bill,” says Kevin Kester, rancher and first vice president of CCA. “We can work together to achieve the mutual goal of keeping open spaces open and preventing the breakup of family ranches.”

The ranching culture is being whittled away by political leaders, media, Hollywood stars and even some country singers. The reality is, no matter how tough the battle, ranchers must stand up and share the good things they are doing on the ground and the benefits they provide to society. Only by sharing their stories can others learn about the need to preserve family ranches and the cowboy culture.

NEVADA COUNTY RCD



Reader Ranch grassland, Nevada County, Calif.

The California Cattlemen’s Association is a leader in the Rangeland Coalition, but the CCA and participating ranchers have not written a blank check for agreement on all issues with the environmentalists. However, the Rangeland Coalition has shown ranchers how to collaborate with a new group of stakeholders in supporting efforts to sustain economically successful ranches, now that science has proven the benefits of managed grazing—even in the state some call La-La Land. ■

*Tracy Schohr is the director of rangeland conservation for the California Cattlemen’s Association, where she is a coordinator of the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition. Her position is jointly funded with dues dollars from California ranchers and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Tracy grew up on a ranch and continues today to remain actively engaged in her family’s farming operation. For more information, go to [www.carangeland.org](http://www.carangeland.org).*

*Lesla Osterholm, manager of Nevada County Resource Conservation District in Grass Valley, Calif., produced a 10-minute DVD on the environmental benefits of grazing, with financial support from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. She was assisted by film producer and editor John Munro of JM Digital Studio. For more information, call Lesla at 530-272-3417, ext. 107, and go to [www.carangeland.org](http://www.carangeland.org) or [www.rangemagazine.com](http://www.rangemagazine.com) for link to video.*

*the right thing. We work closely with our beef clients and customers [who] want to have beef products that are healthy and natural. They know where they’ve been raised [and] how the animals have been treated; and they know the land’s been taken care of during the course of raising those animals, and it just works well for everybody.”*

**JOE DIDONATO  
EAST BAY REGIONAL PARK DISTRICT**

*“Livestock grazing has tremendous benefits to wildlife management and plant management. It’s important to recognize that a lot of our management decisions are based on good science. We have multiple ponds here that can also serve as breeding habitat for the California red-legged frog, California tiger salamander, and many other common species. Livestock grazing supports a tremendous array of wildlife. The California ground squirrel is a keystone species which supplies habitat underground, for hibernation for amphibians and other insects. It supplies a prey base for raptors, rattlesnakes and larger carnivores like coyotes and bobcats. We’re in the central region of the largest concentration of golden eagles nesting in the world. And the reason for that nesting population is because the landscape is managed to promote the prey base—California ground squirrel. Without livestock grazing, we would rapidly lose our*

HAWK PHOTO © KLAUS A. GEFK



*ground-squirrel population. And we would also lose the associated amphibian populations, and the predator populations that rely on the ground squirrel as the base engineer for this landscape. Livestock grazing removes a lot of*

*the nonnative annual grasses, and promotes biodiversity of wildflowers, forbs and other native plants. There’s a number of ponds that we manage for livestock grazing—as a water source for livestock. But they also serve as a tremendous and important water source for amphibians, reptiles and mammals that come to those ponds. Without the maintenance of a livestock-grazing program, and the means to maintain those ponds, some of those ponds would have been lost. And, in fact, livestock grazing maintains an open-water character of these ponds. We recognize, through our research, that if you exclude ponds from livestock grazing, the vegetation gets too dense, and you lose a lot of these species that rely on that open water. We’ve been working with U.C. Berkeley on some grassland studies for the last seven years. And what they’ve shown is that the diversity of plants and animals are more closely associated with grazed, managed grassland than they are with unmanaged grassland.”*

**ED PANDOLFINO  
SIERRA FOOTHILLS AUDUBON SOCIETY**

*“Most of the birds under the largest threat in North America are birds that use grasslands, specifically in the Central Valley. We happen to be perhaps the most important area in the whole continent for wintering raptors. These grasslands are almost, without exception, private land. These birds are using areas that*

COURTESY U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE



ABOVE: Burrowing owls benefit from grazing. LEFT: Hawks and other raptors need grasslands, and cattle grazing, for prey.

*are not national wildlife refuges or preserves, they are working ranch lands—private land. It’s a pretty simple equation: if we don’t have a viable ranching community—a viable ranching business—then we’re going to lose this grassland. If we lose the grassland, then we’re going to lose one of the continent’s most important raptor areas.”*

**JIM BRANHAM  
SIERRA NEVADA CONSERVANCY**

*“We at the Sierra Nevada Conservancy appreciate the value of working landscapes to the region. They’re not only valuable from an economic standpoint, but certainly from an environmental standpoint, a social and cultural standpoint. When we look at this region, and we look at the lands that are still productive in private ownership, we see how important they are in so many communities up and down the Sierra Nevada. We look at areas where lands have been under stewardship for generations, that are some of our most fabulous resource lands, and some of the parts of the community that if they were to disappear it would be a really devastating loss to the community.”*

**STEVE THOMPSON  
U.S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE**

*“As the regional director for the Fish & Wildlife Service, I care deeply about wildlife conservation. What I’m also learning is how important it is to have partnerships with people who own land and working landscapes who have to make a living off that land. What we’re learning to do is trust and respect each other, and do conservation on the ground for wildlife. Without partnership, there’s no way we can conserve wildlife for future generations.”*