

County family receives prize for staying green

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A Yolo County family has beaten out ranchers in seven states to become the regional winners of the Environmental Stewardship Award Program (ESAP).

Henry and Suzanne Stone, owners of Yolo Land and Cattle Co. west of Esparto, are being recognized for their efforts to promote environmental and economic sustainability through their ranching practices. The couple's sons Scott and Casey and daughters-in-law Karen and Angela were also included in the award.



**Scott and Hank Stone pose on their ranch on Tuesday near Esparto.
(Deo Ferrer/Democrat)**

"Many people who come to us for conservation help come seeking answers and fixes for one problem - erosion or invasive species, water issues or whatever it may be," said Phil

Hogan, Yolo County District Conservationist for USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, a cosponsor of the award.

"But the Stones have tackled and achieved improvements in each resource: Soil, water, native plants, and wildlife habitat," he said. "They are big picture people."

In a state that is home to many progressive cattle producers, the Stones have managed to stand out, expanding their ranching operation while paying close attention to conservation and the environment, said Bruce Hafenfeld, president of the California Cattlemen's Association, another cosponsor of the ESAP award.

Over the past 30 years, the Stones have made many improvements to their 7,500-acre ranch, such as replacing annual and invasive species with native grass plantings and prescribed burning; keeping their herd away from ponds and streams with the assistance of fencing and solar-powered watering troughs; and restoring ponds through grading, fencing and introducing native plants.

The Stone ranch is located along County Road 25 and spreads across two watersheds. The size of the property gives the family a unique opportunity to improve social benefits - such as water quality and wildlife corridors - that are much harder to achieve with smaller parcels of land, Hogan said.

The Stones have expanded their efforts beyond their own considerable holdings by getting neighbors, partners and the public involved. Scott Stone worked with Audubon California to convince 26 neighbors to team up with California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CALFIRE) to control brush encroachment into the grasslands and improve the land's habitat qualities. The so-called Vegetation Management Plan is currently the largest of its kind in the state.

Many of the planting projects employed the help of high school students who came to the ranch through environmental education programs such as the Center for Land Based Learning, Audubon and the local Boy Scouts. Other public education opportunities have included local schoolchildren and chefs from the Culinary Institute of America.

"People across America essentially desire the same things: Open spaces, clean water and a safe food supply, produced in an environmentally healthy and sustainable manner," said Scott Stone. "That is how we try to run our businesses."

The Stone Ranch is one of six regional winners that will go on to compete for the National ESAP Award, which will be announced at the National Cattlemen's Beef Association Convention in February 2008. It is the third California ranch in the past six years to capture the regional title.