



Ranching family creates value in conservation

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Partnerships with other groups boost sustainable grass-fed beef operation

By WES SANDER
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When he's not managing the ranch, running his farmland brokerage or performing with his bluegrass band, Scott Stone likes to watch the Swainson's hawks and burrowing owls roaming his family's Central Valley rangeland.

"The most we ever counted was 75," Stone said on a recent morning while watching a group of hawks circle a nearby field. "It's pretty cool."

Building on a personal interest in land conservation, Stone and his family -- he owns the Yolo Land and Cattle Co. with his father, Hank, and brother Casey -- are gradually building a direct-to-consumer, grass-fed beef operation.

Land-stewardship practices have become an integral part of that effort. Partnerships with government agencies and nonprofits have led to a solid collection of conservation practices on the family's pastures and grain fields.

Those partnerships have helped eradicate invasive plants and restore native grasslands and riparian areas while studying carbon-sequestration techniques and ecosystem responses to restoration efforts.

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association awarded the Stone family its National Environmental Stewardship Award last year.

"I'm really into partnerships," Stone said. "They can affect your bottom line, in a very beneficial manner."

The family runs its beef and grain operation on nearly 20,000 acres spread around the Central Valley and the hills to the west. On a 440-acre spread near Davis, a partnership with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service through the agency's Environmental Quality Incentives Program has helped pay for a

water-recycling system.

The acreage sits on the western edge of the Yolo Bypass, an area that floods periodically from high flows on the Sacramento River. A high aquifer allows irrigation water, which is pumped from a well, to drain into a ditch at the acreage's eastern edge.

The ditch conveys water around the pastures' edge, then back to the acreage's center, where a pump once again distributes the water to the surrounding pastures.

"It's a pretty slick setup," Stone said.

Stone has served on the board of the California Rangeland Trust and as associate director of the Yolo County Resource Conservation District. From those organizations, a local culture has grown around advances in land-stewardship techniques, he said.

Partnering with various agencies "has allowed us to do a lot of things that we wouldn't be able to do," Stone said.

"Every person you ask will give you a different definition of sustainability," he said. "We're trying to run this operation in an economically and environmentally sustainable manner."

For nearly three years, the Stones have produced only grass-fed beef and have slowly begun growing their direct-to-consumer marketing. That effort has so far consisted of selling beef at the Davis Farmers Market, which accounts for about 25 head per year.

That leaves most of their beef to be sold through conventional markets. But the family is gradually developing its own avenues, hoping to eventually sell all of its beef directly, a practice that brings double the return of conventional beef, Stone said.

A well-developed set of land-conservation practices is an essential part of the marketing package, he said.

"We're striving for clean water, we're striving for clean air," he said. "You're really selling the whole picture. You can't leave one thing out."

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Scott Stone

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Hometown: Winters, Calif.

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