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## **Guardians of the range**

**A conservation group that aims to protect 13 million acres is doing the unthinkable: getting ranchers and environmentalists to work together**

By Matt Weiser - Bee Staff Writer

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On a golden morning in the hills of western Yolo County, Scott and Casey Stone sort cattle for shipment to summer pasture.

The brothers, on horseback, silently weave through the noisy herd. With practiced eyes, they match cows with their calves before the truck arrives.

All around them is their 7,500-acre family ranch, a picture-perfect slice of a California landscape that is increasingly at risk.

Open space like this -- rolling hills, ancient oak trees, flower-filled meadows -- defines the state's scenery and supports a huge share of its wildlife. It is also the rallying cry for an unlikely coalition bent on keeping rangeland away from developers eager to satisfy demand for housing.



**Rancher Scott Stone, his father and brother sold development rights to their Yolo County ranch in 2005. They're part of a growing movement to save California's rangeland.**

**Sacramento Bee/Randall Benton**

"There's been a lot of really nice ranches in California that over the years have been purchased and subdivided," said Scott Stone, 50. "We don't want to do that. We're trying to do ecologically friendly, sustainable ranching that benefits both us and the watershed and wildlife."

That's why the Stone brothers and their father, Hank, in 2005 preserved rangeland by selling development rights on their ranch. It's why they support the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition, which aims to protect about 13 million acres of oak woodland and grazing land between Redding and Bakersfield.

Taking on such a task shouldn't be a big deal for the coalition. After all, it's already achieved the unthinkable: getting environmentalists and cattle ranchers to work together.

Last year, 32 environmental and agriculture groups launched the alliance by signing the "California Rangeland Resolution." They committed to keeping grazing lands in the hands of cattle and sheep ranchers and helping them preserve the land by funding conservation projects.

For this, entities like the California Cattlemen's Association joined longtime adversaries such as Defenders of Wildlife, known for battling ranchers to reintroduce wolves in the Rocky Mountains.

Despite historic differences, the two found they care equally about the same California landscape.

California lost 105,000 acres of grazing land to urbanization between 1990 and 2004, according to the state Department of Conservation. The California Oak Foundation projects it could lose 750,000 acres more by 2040.

"We have a common threat, and that is the conversion of rangeland to homes and strip malls and sprawl," said Kim Delfino, California program director at Defenders of Wildlife. "It's actually nice to have a project where we're all working together rather than at cross-purposes. It is ambitious, but there's a great potential for success."

Steve Thompson, regional boss of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is credited with inspiring the coalition. In 2004, when he first came to Sacramento, he met separately with ranchers and environmentalists.

He got an earful about perceived inadequacies of federal environmental law. He challenged them to draft position papers on their environmental priorities, which he later shared with the other side.

"I kept saying, 'I understand what you're against. What are you for?'" Thompson said. "It turned out both the cattlemen and the environmental groups had a tremendous amount of overlap. It didn't surprise me, but I think it surprised them."

The groups later met for a barbecue on a ranch in Sunol in August 2005. The discussion continued a few months later at the cattlemen's annual conference, including a panel discussion called "Boots and Birkenstocks" focusing on common ground.



Rolling oak woodland near the Stone family's Yolo Land & Cattle Co. is a picture-perfect slice of California landscape that a new coalition is working to preserve. "There's been a lot of really nice ranches ... that have been purchased and subdivided," said rancher Scott Stone. "We don't want to do that. We're trying to do ecologically friendly, sustainable ranching that benefits both us and the watershed and wildlife."

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By January 2006, the resolution was signed and an agenda began to take shape. The Fish and Wildlife Service and cattlemen kicked in money to hire a full-time employee to staff the effort, and environmental groups are raising money to hire another.

It's all a dramatic reversal from rangeland conflict in the 1990s.

"A lot of it had to do with miscommunication, a lack of understanding, and just not sharing information with each other," said Tracy Schohr, director of rangeland conservation at the cattlemen's association -- and the first staffer hired by the coalition. "By working together, we can achieve so much more than going on parallel tracks."

Oak groves and their associated grasslands are one of the most diverse habitats anywhere. More than 300 species depend on them, from birds of prey to songbirds and bears to salamanders.

Thompson hopes the coalition helps prevent more California wildlife from joining the endangered species list, which increases taxpayer costs and regulatory burdens.

"Just adding another species on the (endangered) list doesn't give me much satisfaction," said Thompson. "What really gives me satisfaction is watching species recover. We do that by working with people."

One of the coalition's immediate goals is more money, from the new federal Farm Bill, to buy development rights on California grazing lands.

The Stone family sold a conservation easement on 6,983 acres of their ranch to California Rangeland Trust in 2005. The process took three years, Scott Stone said, and drew funds from the state Wildlife Conservation Board and Packard Foundation.

Money is the limitation to more such deals, not demand, Stone said. The trust has 50 pending applications from ranchers for conservation easements, representing a half-million acres of grazing land. Easements typically sell for several million dollars for large parcels of land.

Coalition members complain that the federal Farm Bill has short-changed California on conservation funding for years, despite its prominence as a farming state. Over the last 10 years California received an average of only \$1.2 million a year for farm and ranch easements under the Farm Bill, said Delfino of Defenders of Wildlife.

The group hopes to secure more money for replanting native grasses and managing streams and ponds differently to improve wildlife habitat. Money is also needed to continue programs like "safe harbor." In this plan the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ensures that property owners who accommodate endangered species don't face new restrictions when those species return.

Though the goal is to keep ranching lands private, everyone will benefit, supporters say, because of improved water quality and richer wildlife diversity.

The public also benefits from protection of scenery that defines much of California, advocates say. Grazing has replaced fire in keeping the state's oak-studded interior open and grassy.

Without grazing, millions of acres could become choked with shrubbery, changing the scenery and fostering a catastrophic fire threat.

"For too long, all of us have taken these rural lands for granted, and now population pressures are pushing out on them," said Janet Santos Cobb, president of the California Oak Foundation, another coalition member. "It's our signature landscape, in many ways, and it needs protection."

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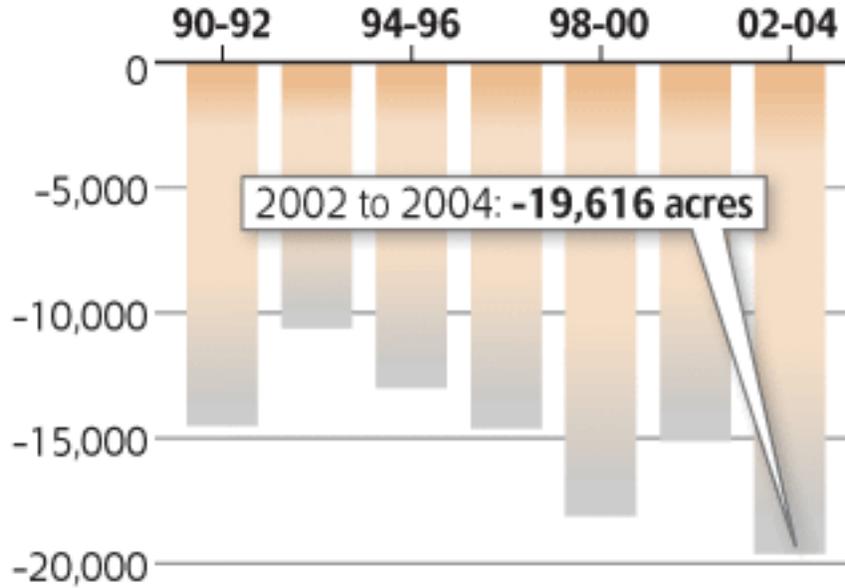
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## Rangeland going urban

Conversion of grazing land to urban land in California, in acres, from 1990 to 2004:



Source: California Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program

Sacramento Bee/Robert Dorrell