



## The benefits of grazing

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By Kate Campbell

Cattle grazing, and other good range management practices, can add greatly to the health and vitality of California's native landscape.

## Ranchers lead efforts to protect rangeland

In the spring, California rangeland is carpeted with wildflowers and dotted with grazing cattle. In the fall, the grassy meadows look like brown velvet and wildlife rattles the chaparral.

Monterey County rancher George Work says the beauty of this ever-changing landscape is one of his greatest pleasures because he knows cattle grazing, and other good range management practices, can add greatly to the health and vitality of this important native landscape.

Work says he and Elaine, his wife of 45 years, don't have a favorite spot to enjoy the beauty on their ranch's 12,000 acres. Rather, "it's God's creation as a whole we love, on a daily basis."

Through a variety of wildlife management techniques, the Work Family Ranch has more than 300 different species thriving there, including tule elk, which at one time were nearly extinct. Along with that, there are several hundred head of beef cattle and a small herd of horses.

"I grew up here and took over management from my father in the 1950s," Work said. "We've run cattle and farmed dryland grain and hay since the 1800s. In those days, exotic annual grasses began to take over, creating a significant impact on the land. And there were other forces—erosion, invasive plants and animals, as well as grazing practices—that left their marks."

Today the family manages the ranch using techniques very different than the ones employed by early California ranchers. These days the Works focus on a "whole system approach" that



takes into consideration the needs of a complex environment. They continue to raise beef cattle and also offer hunting, trail riding and overnight guest accommodations.

Work's son, Ben, and his wife, Kelly, who represent the family's fourth generation on the land, are busy taking over ranch operations. That frees George to devote an increasing amount of time to teaching and discussing good grazing techniques and the part human dynamics play in land management throughout California and the West.

A soft-spoken realist, George Work says the impact of more than 200 years of grazing and beef production is simply part of his own ranch's evolution. To ensure a healthy environment in the future, the Works make decisions about the land based on how it exists today.



“Our family uses a holistic decision-making process that aims for outcomes that are ecologically sound, socially just and economically viable,” Work said.

The cattle part of the family operation has undergone a dramatic transformation with the adoption of holistic management techniques, he says, explaining that seeing how all parts of the landscape work together aids in managing for a healthier environment.

Rather than raising cattle as an end in itself, the Work family, and many like them, now view cattle as a tool for good range management.

“Some years back we realized that we’re not really in the cattle business,” Work said with a chuckle. “That was a surprise. What we found is that we’re really grass farmers. The cattle are just a way to harvest it and make a living.”

To improve the grasses on his ranch and increase the market weight of the cattle, Work says they’ve combined herds to make it easier to use the cattle in ways that benefit the range. This also provides recovery periods for the plants.

Pelayo Alvarez, Defenders of Wildlife program manager based in Sacramento, says that in California the grazing season is short, compared to other areas in the United States, so grazing has to be carefully managed for positive environmental outcomes.

“But grazing isn’t the only thing that impacts the range. A big problem we have in California is invasive species,” he said. “Grazing is probably one of the most important tools we have for controlling things like yellow starthistle. Cows, sheep and goats all eat it.”

A native of Eurasia, yellow starthistle was introduced accidentally sometime around 1849. Alvarez says it is by far the fastest-spreading and most-invasive nonnative plant the state has ever seen.

“One of the things I’d like to stress is that we need the ranchers in order to have effective rangeland conservation,” he said. “It’s not just about various interests—the public, environmentalists, government agencies and ranchers—getting along. It’s that we need each other to restore and protect our native grassland and

savannahs.

“The idea that you can protect the land—and at the same time farmers and ranchers can make a living—that’s just great, especially when it adds up to a positive effect on our environment,” Alvarez said.

Work offers another example of how cattle improve the rangeland. To begin a habitat restoration project, the family used their cattle to knock down invasive, fire-prone brush and allow a greater variety of native plants to return. They tossed some alfalfa hay into the area they wanted cleared and turned the cattle in.



“In two feedings of about 15 minutes each, the hungry cattle crushed the brush with their excited behavior,” he said. “No land-scarring firebreak needed, no burn permit, no air pollution and no fire scarring of the landscape to clear it. The trampled brush provided ground cover to prevent winter erosion from runoff and spring brought a resurgence of perennial grasses and tender sprouts, which was wonderful deer feed.”

What’s sometimes misunderstood, ranchers say, is that California’s vital grasslands aren’t beautiful and healthy by accident. Restoring and maintaining this native environment takes a lot of thought and commitment.

The California Farm Bureau Federation has joined the California Cattlemen’s Association, ranchers, environmentalists, university and government researchers and a number of state and federal agencies to form the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition. The coalition is united by the understanding that nearly all species of grassland birds, most native plants and threatened vernal pool species benefit from responsible grazing practices.

Work is considered a resource for information on native grasses and restoration techniques, often speaking to groups like the California Native Grasslands Association and others interested in rangeland issues. He and his family have received numerous awards for their environmental work, including the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association Stewardship Award and the federal government’s prestigious National Water and Soil Conservation Award. Additionally, the California Resource Conservation Districts has named George Work conservationist of the year.

“The philosophy for improving or restoring the environment used to be, remove humans, leave it alone and the land will go back to nature,” said environmental activist and author Dan Dagget.

The problem with removing people and their food-producing activities from the land, he says, is that “humans are an important part of the very ecosystems we’re trying to restore.

“Removing ourselves from (the landscape) dooms us,” he said. “It’s like trying to put back together an extremely complex puzzle with a very important piece missing—us.”

Ranchers agree that there’s a change in the way people think about grazing, a growing recognition that, when

done properly, there can be far-reaching benefits from this time-honored agricultural practice. But, they also understand that past practices have done damage to the environment and created public concerns.

“Managed grazing, when it’s done well, actually enhances the organic matter in the soil, improving its ability to store carbon,” said Shasta County rancher Henry Giacomini, who is chairman of California Farm Bureau Federation’s Public Lands Advisory Committee. “And, it improves the water and mineral cycles and allows the whole ecosystem to function in a way that’s healthier.

“At our ranch we use irrigated pastures and concentrate the cattle, moving them every day. We monitor the condition of residual grass after we move them and watch to see how well the grasses recover after a rest.

“We use buffers along our creeks, ungrazed strips of grasses that can filter material running off the fields,” he added. “That technique protects the stream banks from erosion and improves water quality.

“But doing these kinds things is quite a bit of work,” Giacomini said. “We’re at it every day, moving cattle and portable fences, monitoring and modifying plans. That’s the intensity of management that we think is beneficial.”

Noting that grazing animals, including great herds of elk and deer, have been a vital part of the state’s grassland ecology for thousands of years, Giacomini said Farm Bureau policy recognizes that grazing is the most practical and environmentally acceptable way to prevent the buildup of excessive, dry vegetation that can lead to catastrophic wildfires.

Rangeland, both public and private, is essential to maintaining viable ranching businesses, but equally important, Giacomini said, is the growing understanding of the benefits California ranchers bring to the environment.

George Work agrees, saying, “The overriding thing for us is the vision we have for a healthy landscape and a productive future. My whole family is involved in operating the ranch to achieve the vision.”

## **Grazing offers a bounty of benefits**

Ranchers and researchers say there are a number of very important environmental benefits from responsible grazing of public and private lands. Those benefits include:

- Increased diversity of plant and animal species.
- Control of invasive plant species, such as yellow starthistle.
- Habitat restoration for threatened and endangered species.
- Controlling erosion from water runoff for improved water quality.
- Improving vegetation along stream banks and watershed health.
- Reducing wildfire threat from rangeland fires.
- Offering visually attractive vistas.
- Preventing fragmentation of habitat from housing and commercial development and maintaining connected wildlife corridors.
- Preserving open space in a rapidly growing state.
- Providing food for consumers.
- Offering recreational opportunities, such as hiking and wildlife viewing.



# How you can help keep invasive plants in check

California's native landscape is being overrun with invasive plants and pests. Experts say it costs the state upwards of \$85 million a year to control and eradicate plant invaders, but they stress there are ways to reduce the onslaught and protect the environment.

PlantRight is a new program designed specifically to help home gardeners do their part to keep invasive plants in check.

“Most of the plants used in gardens and landscaping do not invade wildlands and harm wildlife,” said Andrea Fox, California Farm Bureau Federation legislative coordinator and a leader in the PlantRight coalition. “But a few species can—and do—escape from cultivated areas into open landscapes and cause serious ecological problems.”

Invasive species crowd out native plants, insects and animals, and can lead to flooding, fire and crop losses.

The PlantRight Web site ([www.plantright.org](http://www.plantright.org)) provides information on smart, region-specific gardening choices.

“You are one click away from viewing plants that have proven to be invasive in your area, along with the many non-invasive alternative plants that provide the color, coverage, beauty and functionality you are looking for,” Fox said.

## For more information...

California Rangeland Conservation Coalition: [www.carangeland.org](http://www.carangeland.org)

California Cattlemen's Association: [www.calcattlemen.org](http://www.calcattlemen.org)

University of California: [californiarangeland.ucdavis.edu](http://californiarangeland.ucdavis.edu)

The Work Family Guest Ranch: [www.workranch.com](http://www.workranch.com)

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