

UNDERSTANDING WORKING RANGELANDS

Bay Area Ranching Heritage: A Continuing Legacy

THE BAY AREA RANCHING HERITAGE

The Bay Area is best known for San Francisco and the technology-rich Silicon Valley; however, the area's most prevalent land use largely goes unnoticed by much of the public. Working ranches from Santa Clara to Sonoma

County, including rangelands, irrigated, and dryland pastures (but not related acreage for silage, hay, green chop and grains), are the number-one land use in this world-renowned urban center, occupy roughly 1.4 million of the Bay Area's 4.48 million acres (Bay Area County Crop Reports 2012). Whether working ranches are on public or private land, many Bay Area ranchers represent the fourth, fifth, or sixth generations stewarding the land and their livestock. These working ranches also contribute over \$132 million per year to the Bay Area economy and represent the third-highest-value agricultural commodity in the region (Bay Area County Crop Reports 2012).

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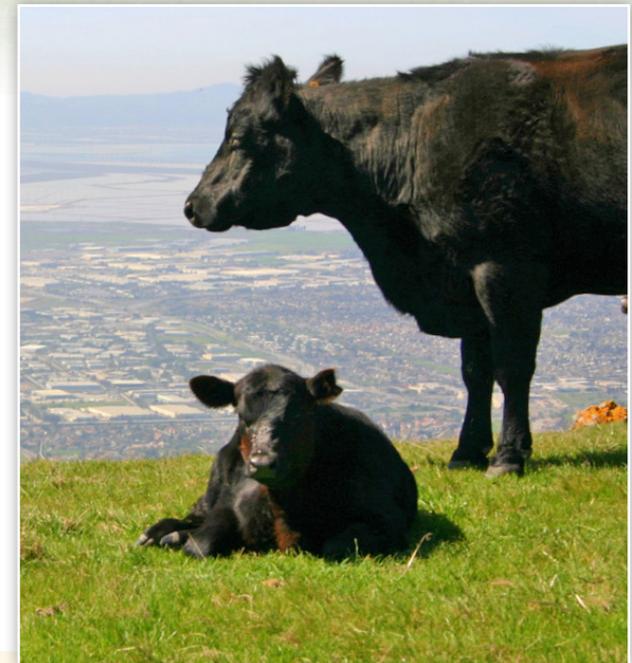


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Working rangelands are public or privately owned open space lands that are managed with livestock grazing and rancher stewardship. Their management contributes to the production of a variety of ecosystem services, including food, clean water, weed control, wildlife habitat, fire fuel reduction, carbon sequestration, pollination, aesthetic views, cultural heritage, recreational and educational opportunities, and open space conservation.



As the primary land use, ranching maintains open space in the Bay Area and has played a central role in the area's culture and economy for centuries. Local ranchers, mostly in the North Bay, not only produce meat and dairy products from cows, sheep, and goats but are also responsible for open views, precious habitats, recreational lands, and a link to the culture that formed the foundation of California's history. The many intangible attributes of California's ranching heritage have been bequeathed by past generations of ranchers and kept alive by their descendants.

The roots of modern-day livestock ranching in the Bay Area reach back 300 years to a time before land was parceled up and fenced to define property boundaries. Both livestock and wildlife roamed free. Following Christopher Columbus's importation of European livestock to the New World in 1493, other explorers and Spanish missionaries also arrived with livestock to feed themselves and provide leather and tallow. These products were major exports to Europe and supported the growing California economy. The hides were so valuable relative to the beef that before 1848, a person could kill a head of beef for food if he skinned it and left the hide for the owner (Burcham 1957).

Between 1784 and 1846, the Spanish and then the Mexican governments encouraged settlement of territory now known as California by the establishment of large land grants called ranchos, the basis of the English word *ranch*. The more than eight hundred land grant titles were government issued, permanent, unencumbered

property ownership rights to the ranchos. Devoted to raising cattle and sheep, the ranchos established land-use patterns in California that are recognizable today and greatly increased the number of domestic livestock.

Although both the missions and the ranchos increased the number of domestic livestock, the California Gold Rush, which in 1846 turned San Francisco into a boomtown, had more impact on California and Bay Area livestock production than any historical event. The sudden increase in San Francisco's population created an enormous demand for beef, causing California cattle numbers to quadruple and sheep numbers to increase more than sixty-fold from 1850 to 1860 (Burcham 1957). Virtually all of the open space lands in the Bay Area were used for ranching at this time.

Today, grazing, primarily by beef cattle, continues on public and privately owned Bay Area rangeland, including grasslands, oak woodlands, shrublands, and riparian areas. The profit margin in the livestock industry is generally slim and inconsistent, and few privately owned parcels in the Bay Area are large enough to support the number of livestock needed to make a living. Most ranchers therefore depend on some combination of owned and leased land, including both private and public, for their livestock operations (Sulak and Huntsinger 2007). Land for ranching becomes scarcer as rangeland in California continues to be converted to other uses. Housing developments, shopping centers, orchards, vineyards, and produce fields are clearly no place for livestock. Many ranchers struggle

to find enough land to maintain and increase their herds. Using open space lands and parks owned by the public and conservation organizations is becoming critical to sustaining the ranching industry and providing vegetation management. Livestock grazing, associated infrastructure such as stock ponds, and rancher stewardship of these lands are critical to achieving conservation goals.

The relationship between private and public ranch land necessary to support viable livestock operations helps keep larger tracts of land open and productive, which, with the help of ranchers and public agencies, protects them both against further fragmentation (Sulak and Huntsinger 2007). Despite the myriad of challenges, including access to enough land and forage, livestock ranching continues today as a significant Bay Area agricultural industry and steward of open space.

Ranching has changed over the years, but its long-term traditions and way of life are still alive. While most contemporary ranchers ride the range in their pickup trucks or four-wheelers, most still monitor, gather, and work their cattle from horseback. Modern developments in ranching include genetic improvement of livestock achieved through sophisticated breeding programs, radio chip ear tags that can be used to upload livestock data to computers, and use of managed grazing for furthering conservation goals. There are also new cattle marketing choices, including forward price contracting (a commitment from a buyer to purchase cattle on a future date at an agreed price) and video sales, in which videos of the cattle are shown during an auction that can be accessed by buyers online or by satellite. Some ranchers sell their federally inspected processed meats directly to consumers online, by contract to retailers and restaurateurs, or at local farmers markets. Although advancements in production and new marketing choices set today's ranchers apart from former generations, ranching continues to be strongly rooted in community, with friends and neighbors frequently joining together to help each other on roundup days to gather, vaccinate, and brand cattle.

The life of a rancher is not an easy one, with 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week responsibilities and work that can easily top 10 or 12 hours per day every day. Paychecks, which for cattle ranchers with cow-calf operations come only once a year when the year's crop of

calves are sold, are unpredictable, as are expenses. Annual rainfall and temperatures can have dramatic impacts on forage production, which can vary by up to 300 percent between years (George et al. 2001). Drought can limit the availability of livestock water and can result in inadequate forage to sustain herds. Ranchers are often forced to purchase feed, sell calves early, or sell part of their herd when forage is not available (McDougald et al. 2001). In addition, allied businesses that support ranching, including local livestock auction yards, feed yards, slaughterhouses, federally inspected butcher cut and wrap shops, equipment dealers, well drillers, large animal veterinarians, and even agricultural banking, are few and far between or no longer available, especially in the San Francisco Bay Area. This makes keeping a working ranch viable difficult and expensive. Despite these realities of ranching life, many livestock producers still would not trade it for anything. In a survey conducted of ranchers in Alameda, Contra Costa, and Tehama counties, over 90 percent indicated that “feeling close to the earth” and “having a good place to raise a family” were important reasons to continue ranching (Liffman et al. 2000).

Ranching began as a way to provide necessary products such as hides, tallow for candles, and meat. Now, in addition to the agricultural products that come from livestock, ranching is also recognized as an essential industry that provides numerous ecosystem services—benefits to environmental and human health that derive from nature and managing nature. If it weren't for the families who have kept Bay Area ranching alive, open space and watershed lands, local food sources, native plant and animal habitats, and fire fuel management would be negatively affected. Ranchers have kept an important part of California's heritage alive, and we all need to help with this effort.

HOW CAN WE HELP KEEP BAY AREA RANCHING HERITAGE ALIVE?

- Support ranching on public and conservation lands.
- Consider how local ordinances and state legislation may affect ranching and voice your opinion with local officials or at the ballot box.
- Be patient and accepting of the inconveniences of working ranches.
- Learn about the ecosystem services provided by working rangelands.
- Buy locally produced livestock products.

CALIFORNIA AND BAY AREA RANCHING TIMELINE

- 1493: Christopher Columbus brought European livestock to what is now California.
- 1769: First California mission was established by Spanish monks on San Diego Bay.
- 1776: Mission Dolores was established and began raising sheep and cattle in what is now San Francisco.
- Late 1700s to early 1800s: Spanish land grants led to ranchos, which established modern-day land use patterns.
- 1812: Russian fur traders establish Fort Ross in Sonoma County; livestock raising there was essential for household goods and export to Alaska.
- 1820s to 1840s: Mexican land grants give titles to plots of land to individuals.
- 1848: Gold discovered at Sutter's Mill; the demand for beef skyrockets.
- 1848: Mexico cedes California to the United States in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the Mexican-American War.
- 1850: California admitted to the Union as the thirty-first state.
- Late 1800s: California land division increases and land parcels are created.
- 1930s: Rangeland is purchased by the East Bay Regional Park District for its first park.
- 1950s: Urban sprawl begins on Bay Area agricultural lands.
- 1960s: "Hippies" and others in the Bay Area move from cities to agricultural lands, but ranchers keep on ranching.
- 1970s: Point Reyes National Seashore formed; U.S. red meat consumption per capita begins to decline.
- 1980s: U.S. red meat consumption per capita continues to decline.
- 1990s: Nonpoint source pollution regulations have economic impact on livestock production, especially in the North Bay, where dairy operations are converted to beef cattle operations because of compliance costs.

- 2000s: Local food movement takes off, and the ecological benefits of grazing become widely recognized.
- 2010s: The "Farm to Table" concept becomes popular, emphasizing local food; most park districts and other public landowners recognize the mutual benefits of public lands grazing.

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