

Taking Grazing to the Next Level

Rancher benefits from Bay area managed lands

by Tracy Schohr, director of rangeland conservation, California Cattlemen's Association

For nearly a one-half century, Fields Livestock, Castro Valley, has been grazing the same land in one of the most populated regions in the nation, California's Bay Area. When East Bay Regional Park District (District), based in Oakland, acquired the rolling hills studded with oak trees, abundant with wildlife and home to a diversity of plants, they continued the management practices that had been on the land, grazing.

In 1961, the District acquired the Sunol Regional Wilderness park (Park), that same year, Fields' began the grazing the 4,700-acre site.

With a rich history originating in 1934, the District today spans more than 100,000 acres with 65 parks, including 1,100 miles of trails. The nation's largest regional park district began with the foresight of local leaders seeking to preserve watershed lands in region. With a strong grassroots campaign, the District was created with a 71 percent approval rating at the polls. What's even more impressive is that this ballot measure passed in the height of the Great Depression.

With California's legacy in

environmental conservation, it is not surprising that voters created the first regional park district in the nation. This vision of local leaders sought to balance recreational opportunities and natural resources, uncommon for the time.

The mission of the District is to provide recreational opportunities, preserving the natural beauty of the land and protect wildlife habitat. The same values that the visionary leaders sought when the District was formed more than 75 years ago, today is achieved with managed grazing.

As David Amme, the District's wildland vegetation program manager recalled, "The District has been grazing for a long time, and there have been situations where the grazing program was questioned. There are strong reasons and objectives to the grazing on the land, including preventing brush encroachment and encouraging wildlife habitat."

The District has leases with ranchers in the region, providing forage to cattle, sheep and goats, while promoting healthy natural resources and diverse ecosystems. Nearly one-half of the District parks located in

Contra Costa and Alameda counties are grazed.

Russ Fields, owner of Fields Livestock, controls invasive species, reduces fire fuel loads, promotes native plants and creates habitat preferred by common species, and species of special concern on public land through cattle grazing.

The lease Fields has with the District is one of a handful of year-long grazing leases on public ground. Annually, he is responsible for meeting goals and objectives set forth by the District on the site.

On the Park, there is Residual Dry Matter (RDM) monitoring objectives that have to be met. In addition, you can find grazing exclosures on the Park, which serve as long term controls to demonstrate the benefits of managed grazing on the site.

"There has been opposition to the cattle on the site over the years," reflects Amme. "In response, the District has created a Wildland Management Policies document and taken up more extensive research on monitoring species composition and trends in collaboration with a

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Cattle owned by Fields Livestock grazing in the hills near Castro Valley.



Russ Fields of Castro Valley looking over the East Bay Regional Park District he manages.

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University of California, Berkeley, professor and graduate students.”

Like many open scenic vistas around the state, it is the rancher’s stewardship that is responsible for the healthy landscapes. It is no different at the Park.

Fields has partnered with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to improve the access, reliability and distribution of livestock water on the public ground. Under the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), a cost-share program authorized by the U.S. Congress under the Farm Bill, this rancher was able to receive cost-share funding to improve the land and his cattle operation like hundreds of ranchers throughout the state do annually.

“I paid the up-front costs to implement the water system, and was later reimbursed by the District,” recalls Fields. “It was because the District was committed to a long term lease, continuing grazing for the life of the EQIP contract, that I was able to access the federal funds and make the project a reality.”

It is also important to recognize that a rancher is only eligible to receive a limited amount of funding under the EQIP program. Fields utilized his eligible funding to improve the District Park, forgoing installing improvements on his personal land.

“Working with Russ and the East Bay Regional Parks District on this project has been a great example of how by working cooperatively, we can maximize the grazing and habitat enhancement benefits of the NRCS Farm Bill Programs. As the lessee, Russ brings his years of experience as a land steward and cattleman managing livestock on this rough terrain, the East Bay Regional Parks District brings their people and habitat enhancement goals and skills, and NRCS brings its technical assistance, funding and conservation planning. Together, it’s a winning team,” states Terry Huff, Alameda County District Conservationist, NRCS.

Fields worked with **Jed Freitas**, owner of Freitas Rangeland Improvements, Livermore, to implement the solar water systems on the District Park. Freitas has worked with NRCS and ranchers to implement water distribution systems on private land throughout the state, in addition to working with a variety of public land agencies to install systems to improve grazing management on public lands.

“This particular project entails an extensive system including a well, solar-powered water pumping system, two water storage tanks, eight troughs and more than 13,000 linear feet of water distribution

pipeline(s), replacing an unreliable pond and spring system,” states Freitas. “Together, with the foresight of Fields, we designed a system so the troughs were placed away from the trails to minimize potential confrontation between livestock, recreationists and unleashed dogs.”

At one particular location, the water system used for recreationists was redesigned to handle the needs of the cattle and for the hikers. Fields also installed over 40,000 feet of fencing on the Park with EQIP funds to improve the rotational grazing system. Over the years, fencing has been installed to exclude cattle from riparian areas, promoting clean water.

“Fields has implemented great improvement projects on the site,” states Amme.

The rotational grazing system in place at the Park allows Fields to move cattle to other locations when wildflowers are in bloom. For just shy of a decade, Fields, without direction from the District, annually moves the cattle from pastures that are home to abundant wildflowers displays to help promote the regeneration of species such as the Johnny Jump Up.

The stewardship of public ground by Fields goes beyond that owned by the District; he also grazes watershed lands owned by the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission.

“For us to keep our livelihood in

ranching, we have to have access to public ground,” states Fields.

In a University of California report titled, *Public Land Grazing for Private Land Conservation?*, Fields statement is shown to hold true for other ranchers in the Bay Area.

In response to a total loss of access to public grazing, over one-third of the ranchers surveyed said they would likely sell their ranches. When the private acreage attached to these public leases is taken into consideration, this study reveals how public land management decisions affect California’s private rangelands.

Fields is not shy to say that grazing public land comes with it challenges. Every time there is a new manager at

the Park he has to explain the cattle grazing operation and the reasoning behind activities. He has also had to deal with opposition to grazing on the park and objections to his ability to graze year-round on the Park.

In addition, there is a lot of interface with the public. Over the years, Fields has witnessed the increased utilization of the Park he grazes by hikers, bird watchers, mountain bikers and those looking to give their children an appreciation of the outdoors.

He is out almost every day checking the cattle, keeping a mindful watch not to disturb visitors. Also, Fields keeps a lookout for any management concerns that need to be addressed, working with Park staff.

Ranchers grazing California’s public lands have a huge role in the health of our state’s natural resources and a hefty responsibility to graze in a sustainable fashion. Ranchers with leases on public ground are today’s image of the American west and grazing in California. This is particularly true in the case of Fields, who grazes a site that is visited annually by hundreds of recreationists.

According to Fields, “There is always more room for those in our industry to educate the public on the benefits of grazing and the actions ranchers like me make every day to care for the water, land and wildlife in our state.”