



Guardians of the Range

California Rangeland Conservation Coalition

"It's part of the ethic [as] caretaker of the land...you're here for a short time; the land's here forever."

- Steve Sinton

Photos courtesy of Steve Sinton and USDA-NRCS.

Partners

- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service
- California Department of Fish & Game
- California Rangeland Trust
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Ranching with Wildflowers & Wildlife

Avenales & Canyon Ranches, San Luis Obispo

Sustainability. While folks may quibble over nuances of the term, Steve Sinton and the ranchland he and his family oversee, have their own way of defining sustainability. It is a definition spoken not in words but written across the landscape with roots that reach 150 years deep. It means coexisting populations of livestock and "a host of



wildlife creatures great and small." It means a wildflower display on land grazed by cattle, cited by researchers as among California's most spectacular, and visited by thousands every spring. It means a living family history book with its California chapters originating in small land purchases from homesteaders, acquiring more land originally purchased with Civil War Veterans script; a later chapter of losing most parcels in a great drought of the 1890s, and later still of repurchasing and overseeing them, generation after generation after generation.

Today, the Sintons' nearby Avenales and Canyon ranches in eastern San Luis Obispo County are run as a cow-calf operation and overseen by Steve and his wife, Jane, and Steve's parents, James and Norma. Stocking rates are in flux reflecting the precipitation (or lack of it) and resulting feed supply. If drought keeps conditions sparse more heifers are sold. Currently, the ranch is rebuilding and so more heifers are around to see those wildflower displays while they rebuild the livestock population. Cattle are encouraged to utilize upper reaches of the ranch by pumping and placing water sources at upland sites, work that he has partnered with NRCS's EQIP program to achieve. In the past Sintons had tried higher stocking rates at the suggestion of 'experts' but found the results "disastrous." "We look at the grass and we look at the condition of the cattle and we keep things in balance," says Steve.

It is a stocking rate that Range Conservationist Karl Striby of NRCS says keeps the ranch in great



Steve Sinton, third generation California rancher.



shape with plenty of residual dry matter that both protects the soil and acts as a hedge against the perennial threat of drought. “The herd size is in equilibrium with the ranch and they leave enough for wildlife,” says Striby.

Wildlife species include everything from red-legged frogs, snakes and turtles to quail, doves, and raptors including golden eagle. Larger species include deer, bobcat, many bear and a herd of 35-80 tule elk that Sinton allowed California Department of Fish and Game to introduce to the ranch over 25 years ago. Despite concessions for wildlife such as



Sinton & Karl Striby, NRCS Range Conservationist discuss planting and brush control options.

“quail guzzlers,” brushpiles left for bird cover, and a fenced riparian area, Sinton insists he does nothing special to manage for wildlife. “If we do what we are supposed to do right, there is a place for them on the ranch,” he summarizes.

Sinton also makes a place on the ranches for many researchers from the University of California Cooperative Extension Service and elsewhere seeking to better understand natural processes in the low-disturbance natural setting the ranches provide. Studies hosted in the vast outdoor laboratory include several studies on native oak growth and regeneration, weed dispersal, anadromous fish, and most recently, sensors to measure continental drift.



Wild turkeys and Tule elk are two of the many types of wildlife that call the ranch home.



To Sinton, however, his proudest conservation achievement is the work he has done with the California Rangeland Trust (CRT). As a founding member and a lawyer by training, Sinton was pivotal in

developing the bylaws, setting up the non-profit status, securing donations, researching easement programs and ultimately placing 183,000 acres of California rangeland—including the Hearst Ranch—beyond development’s reach. Another 400,000 acres representing 60 ranchers are on a waiting list. He was CRT’s first Chair, and continues to serve on their Board of Directors, monitor easement properties, and donates an elk hunt for the Trust’s annual fund raising auction, bringing in about \$6,000/year. It is this work with CRT that primarily led in 2005 to Sinton being selected American Farmland Trust’s Steward of the Land.



Dispersed watering facilities help distribute livestock across the ranch.

While researchers, conservationists and others are familiar visitors at the Avenales and Canyon Ranches, it is the early spring that brings the public most closely in touch with the splendors of the ranch. Carpets of wildflowers unfurl themselves across the hillsides in vibrant displays that are among the most noted in California, matching or excelling those on managed public lands. Neither Sinton or the researchers are sure why certain fields stage such a spectacle. “I graze them no differently, so there must be something in the soil,” he muses. Though thousands make pilgrimage to the ranch each year Sinton accommodates them cheerfully (though he did erect a low steel gate “small enough for a horse or person to go over but enough to deter cars” after two mobile homes drove across his hills for a closer look—though most people he says are very respectful). Why host all these non-paying guests? “It’s part of the ethic of thinking that you’re the caretaker of the land,” Sinton says. “It’s more than ownership. You’re here for a short time; the land’s here forever. Why shouldn’t everyone enjoy it?”

This story is courtesy of the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition. To learn more about what other ranchers are doing throughout the state or about this cooperative partnership visit

www.carangeland.org

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