

MEMORANDUM

TO: RVCC Core Group

FROM: Ranching Working Group coordinators (Johnny, James, Shiloh, Alaina)

RE: Briefing paper on ranching issues

Since initial interest at the 2007 Annual Policy Meeting, a Ranching working group has been gaining momentum. Last April, RVCC participants met with agency personnel and interest groups in Washington D.C. to assess ranching policy opportunities. More recently, the working group has had a very successful series of conference calls where participants met one another and discussed their vision for sustainable ranching and their key policy priorities. The group hopes to find significant synergies with other RVCC members who have not attended the calls and between ranching and forestry issues as well.

The following draft briefing paper was used to recruit new members to the RVCC, and to begin to identify common ground among call participants. It summarizes the working group discussions and highlights our emerging vision and areas of agreement. It is intended that this paper, with significant re-formatting (Maia has given us good initial suggestions) and additions emerging from the Annual Policy Meeting will be a “source” for an eventual Ranching Issue Paper(s). For the moment it is provided as background on discussions to date (along with separately attached “policy action areas” that were initially discussed by the group.)

We welcome feedback on the concepts in the briefing paper and will use the ideas contained in it as part of our presentation during the Round Robin sessions.

Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition
Ranching & Ranchlands Working Group
DRAFT Briefing Paper for Discussion
December 2, 2009

Ranching in the Western United States

Ranching – tending livestock as a means to convert grassland resources into food and income – is an important part of the cultural, economic, and ecological landscape of the Western United States.ⁱ The biodiversity and health of a large percentage of the Western landscape currently hinges on the stewardship decisions of a small number of ranches (just over 20,000), most of them multi-generational, family-run businesses.ⁱⁱ Ranches operate in northern forests and southern deserts, across the vast plains, and in almost all rural landscapes in between.

Counting both the ranchlands in private ownership as well as the public lands they lease for grazing, ranchers have an impact on over 400 million acres of grasslands, rangelands, and forests in the eleven Western states.ⁱⁱⁱ Cattle and other livestock species convert forage unsuitable for human consumption into a variety of protein sources and meat products through grazing. Since a considerable amount of this land is not suitable for crop production other than hay, grazing livestock significantly increases the amount of land that can produce food. Ranching can maintain open space and be compatible with biodiversity conservation^{iv} while providing jobs and food, and supporting the heritage and economies of many rural communities.

Ranches are often located in those areas of highest concern for conservationists. Deeded ranchlands cluster around the wet places – riparian areas and wetlands^v that are essential for the lifecycles of the majority of terrestrial and aquatic species, both wild and domesticated. Wildlife under state and federal jurisdiction depend critically on access to private lands at different times of the year for their survival.

Ranchers and ranching are a unique socio-economic institution whose attributes and assets can be leveraged for conservation. Depending on location, rangelands in the Western United States have been home to pastoralists and their herds for between 100 and 500 years. Ranchers have long forgone revenue to support their chosen lifestyle. At present, most stable ranches have a revenue-to-capital ratio of as little as 2-3% -- and this percent is lower when all ranching operations are included.

Challenges to the Future of Ranching & Conservation

Today, the Western United States faces a dynamic of inter-related social, economic and ecological factors that threaten ecosystems, wildlife and ecological services, and also the lifestyle and economies of traditional ranchers and ranching communities. Each ranch is affected by a diverse set of issues rooted in its own unique place such as; the value of amenities or other alternate uses of the particular landscape, the level of dependence on or interface with public lands for grazing, the presence or lack of regulated species (ESA), etc. International trade and national standards for health and safety also play a significant role in ranching income potential. While regional experiences may vary widely, challenges to the conservation of ranchlands and the sustainability of ranching communities throughout the West can include:

- a. Ranch real estate values that far surpass the agricultural value of the land – effectively pricing ranchers out of the market and attracting a new demographic of (often absentee) landowners who are inexperienced and almost entirely untested in their ability to sustain long-term stewardship and conservation.
- b. Exponential growth in demand for smaller, amenity-driven land parcels, as well as oil and gas development and conversion of pasture to non-food (energy) crop production, all contributing to fragmentation and conversion of large landscapes that alters or precludes significant ecological function and species.
- c. Conflicts and misunderstandings regarding regulatory laws, actions, and agencies over threatened, endangered extirpated and invasive species.
- d. A reduction in permanently-employed rangeland conservationists by the land management agencies, and the inability of these agencies to implement mandated monitoring programs for rangeland conditions.

- e. A rural-urban disconnect whereby urban populations have little contact with or understanding of the value and traditions of land stewardship or how to engage with it constructively.
- f. Extremely low returns from commodity beef sales in an increasingly globalized market, which in turn drives incomes lower even as the average ranch operation size (and workload) increases.

These result in three alarming broad-scale trends:

- An aging population of ranchers and a dearth of young people interested in remaining in or returning to ranching communities – effectively de-populating many rural communities and eroding their social fabric.
- The erosion of a stewardship workforce (ranchers) poised to restore and maintain species, natural functions and ecosystem services, and a land tenure institution (ranching) that protects open space.
- The inability of local, state, and national conservation delivery systems (i.e. conservation districts, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, etc.) to provide the technical and financial assistance needed to reach the growing number of landowners and attend to increasing resource concerns.

An Initial RVCC Vision for Ranching and Policy Development

We seek policies that support a “working landscapes” vision of ranching in the Western landscape that has been characterized by concepts and efforts such as “the Radical Center,” “stewardship ranching,” “conservation beef,” and other efforts that recognize:

- Historically, domestic grazing animals have had some of the most extensive impacts on ecological function and species in the West. At the same time, range conditions in the United States have generally improved since the early 1900's,^{vi} ranches remain a frontline for defense of open space, and there are abundant examples of the compatibility between grazing and biodiversity conservation objectives.^{vii}
- Regardless of broad trends, the role of ranching in terms of grazing impacts or potential contributions to open space and biodiversity conservation must be evaluated on a site- and context-specific basis.
- Ranching can be multi-functional – producing food with a relatively low carbon footprint, and providing meaningful employment, cultural traditions, open space, and biodiversity conservation.
- Under the right set of institutional circumstances, ranching can be the most likely, cost effective, sustainable mechanism for rangeland conservation and the provision of ecosystem services (water, open space, carbon sequestration, recreation, and food, fuel, and fiber production).
- Private and public lands intersect in the same landscape and the viability of ranching as a multi-functional service provider is inextricably linked to the interplay between public and private land utilization and conservation.^{viii}
- There are a growing number of innovative individuals and groups who have demonstrated the capacity to achieve significant conservation and operational

resilience within their home territories – and they are the best voices for shaping the policies we need.

Policy Action Areas

The primary goal of the RVCC Ranching working group is to promote policies that encourage, economic, social and ecological sustainability for Western ranchlands. Based on current dynamics within the ranching sector and the policy arena, broad categories of policy development that the working group could promote include:

- Adaptive Management: basing private and public rangeland management on the best available scientific and practical (local) knowledge, and treating the landscape as an integral whole.
- Collaboration and Partnerships: supporting collaboration among the diverse, sometimes competing, interests that affect ranchlands, and creating strong local capacity to innovate and implement solutions.
- Market Support: adding value to traditional ranch products, and diversifying the economic uses of working landscapes through new markets and products such as carbon sequestration.
- Access to Financial Capital: increasing public investment in conservation-based ranching programs, models and economies. (Farm Bill, easements, etc.)
- Landscape Level Conservation: developing policies that recognize the social, economic, and ecological connections between private and public lands throughout the west.

ⁱ Knight, R. L., W. C. Gilgert, and E. Marston (Eds.). 2002. *Ranching west of the 100th meridian*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.

ⁱⁱ Gentner, B. J., and J. A. Tanaka. 2002. Classifying federal public land grazing permittees. *Journal of Range Management* 55:2-11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lubowski, R. N., M. Vesterby, S. Bucholtz, A. Baez, and M. J. Roberts. 2002. Major uses of land in the United States, 2002. USDA Economic Research Service. (<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/EIB14/>).

^{iv} Maestas, J. D., R. L. Knight, and W. C. Gilgert. 2003. Biodiversity across a rural land-use gradient. *Conservation Biology* 17:1425-1434

^v Talbert, C. B., R. L. Knight, and J. E. Mitchell. 2007. Private ranchlands and public land grazing in the Southern Rocky Mountains. *Rangelands* 2:5-8

^{vi} USDI BLM, 1997. *Working Together for the Health of America's Public Lands*. US Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, 1997 Annual Report.

^{vii} Maestas et al. 2003.

^{viii} Talbert et al. 2007.