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Range summit seeks common ground on conservation

California Rangeland Conservation Coalition event draws 200 participants

Bob Krauter
Capital Press

SACRAMENTO - They have butted heads for years, but now California ranchers, regulators and environmental advocates are putting them together to promote common conservation goals. At the annual summit of the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition in Sacramento Tuesday (Jan. 22), a packed room of ranchers, environmentalists and government officials conferred on conservation issues.

Bruce Hafenfeld, a Kern County rancher and president of the California Cattlemen's Association, said the summit has grown from 60 participants in 2006 to nearly 200 this year. After fighting with environmental groups and regulators, he said coalescing, as one group became a matter of survival for ranchers.

"In California, we've got less active ranchers, less beef cattle than we're ever had. So we, alone as an industry, are not even maintaining our grazing presence in California," Hafenfeld said.

The coalition, supported by more than 70 diverse groups that run the alphabet - from the Alameda County board of supervisors to the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation - works collaboratively to protect working landscapes.

Land conversion, not just from development, but other agricultural enterprises, has caused cattle ranches to become an endangered species. Hafenfeld said uniting to save ranches and the valuable habitat and conservation values they provide, is critical.

"Can we do it alone? No. Can we do it as a coalition? We may not be able to stop it, but hopefully create an opportunity to create a long-term presence by preserving things that mean a lot to both of us," Hafenfeld said. "For them, that's habitat, species protection through open space protection. For us, it is saving these ranchers."

The daylong summit program highlighted the coalition's conservation successes in 2007. Speakers also addressed topics ranging from using birds as indicators of conservation effectiveness and tips on regenerating oak woodlands.

Eric Holst, a Sacramento-based manager for Environmental Defense, a national environmental organization, praised the summit as a way for the diverse groups to communicate and collaborate on common goals.

"One of the mantras here is that we disagree on some issues, but we agree on far more than we disagree," Holst said. "Very few landowners are in the business of trying to do the wrong thing, but they may face a confusing regulatory process. So folks on our side of the fence need to understand that and be able to work with them to help."

Support from the environmental groups that are signatories to the coalition's agenda includes help on conservation easements, habitat restoration and enhancement projects, simplifying the regulatory process and being advocates for federal funds to support various conservation initiatives in California.

Holst said there is strong demand by ranchers to participate in permanent conservation easements.

"That's a tool that maybe 10 years ago was not well understood and now we are to the point where dozens of landowners in California are ready to participate," he said. "They're just waiting for funding."

Another summit speaker, Steve Thompson, a regional director for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said what spurred his agency's interest in joining the coalition was the gridlock in implementing the Endangered Species Act and the contentious environment it created with landowners. Conservation and wildlife habitat efforts suffered as a consequence. The coalition, Thompson said, has yielded a change in attitude and approach.

"The synergy of working together is unbelievable. People solve wildlife problems, not regulations, not rules," he said. "It's people working together. The people who own the land understand that."

The change in approach to conservation is evident in the work of the Central Coast Rangeland Coalition, composed of ranchers, scientists, agency officials and conservationists. Rancher Joe Morris said the coalition is developing a set of standards or indicators of rangeland and watershed health applicable to lands on the Central Coast.

"We're discovering new knowledge about animals, plants and relationships, so it's a process of learning," Morris said.

Four categories - water, nutrients, solar energy and biodiversity - are being examined for indicators of rangeland health, Morris said. Coalition members, who manage nearly 200,000 acres, seek to classify, inventory and monitor factors that can affect coastal rangelands that are thought to be among the most species-rich grasslands in North America, according to coalition documents.

"Ultimately, we want a place to hang our hat. We want to leave a legacy for our children, we want the peace of knowing that we did a good job," Morris concluded.



Steve Thompson, left, a regional director with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, talks to Kern County rancher Bruce Hafenfeld at the 2008 summit of the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition in Sacramento. Hafenfeld, president of the California Cattlemen's Association, says the coalition is critical to the survival of the state's cattle industry.

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As the last of the speakers finished the program, Bruce Hafenfeld felt the summit had been a success.

"Just bringing this diverse group together is monumental. It's huge," he said. "The benefits from it also could be significant."

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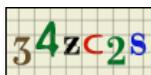
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