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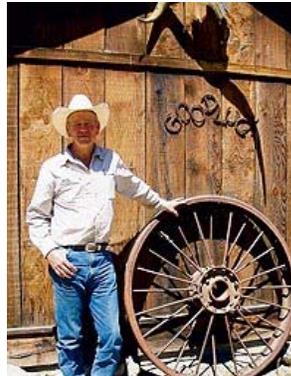
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Rancher honored for conservation work
Chet Vogt: Grazing land health makes economic sense

Cecilia Parsons
Capital Press



Chet Vogt of Three Creeks Ranch in Elk Creek won the 2008 Leopold Conservation award. - Courtesy of Robyn Carliss

An Elk Creek rancher chosen for a nationwide conservation award is honest about the honor.

"Anyone can do what I do," said Chet Vogt, winner of the 2008 Leopold Conservation Award. "All you need to do is think about how to improve your land."

Vogt, who runs Three Creeks Ranch, a 900-head cow-calf operation in Glenn County, says the biggest challenge is to accept that change is necessary. Change in management practices is difficult when the old ways are deeply ingrained - often for many generations, he said.

For him, it makes economic sense as well as ecological sense to improve the health of grazing land. Quantity and quality of forage means the operation is economically sustainable; plant and soil health make it ecologically sustainable.

"If you're honest with yourself, you can find ways to improve," he said.

The core of Vogt's approach to conservation is intensively managed grazing on his 5,300-acre winter range.

His cattle are rotated through 32 fenced fields so that each is grazed as little as 15 days per year. Vogt said the long rest periods in addition to increasing forage availability allows native perennial grasses to thrive.

In 1992, when he first started looking for native perennials, Vogt said he found only one native species. This year, he said 13 different species of native perennials have been located on the ranch. He attributes the recovery to the managed grazing.

"All ranches have these grasses, but with constant grazing you don't see them," he explained.

Vogt, who serves as chairman of the California Cattlemen's Association Rangeland Improvement Committee, said it's not that the native perennials are necessarily better forage. He considers them an indicator plant.

"In my opinion, if the land is healthy and rested they do well, and the land also does well," he said.

The native grasses don't necessarily provide better forage, but they do add more organic matter to the soil and open it up for better water penetration.

Susan Kester, a project manager for Sustainable Conservation, said she has visited the Vogt ranch and has seen the benefits of the managed grazing system. She said Vogt also protects riparian areas on the ranch from overgrazing and that has increased wildlife habitat.

"This is a really progressive ranch, and he has invested a lot of time and management to improve the rangeland," Kester said.

It's not that all ranchers can't use rotational grazing to improve their land, but that type of management also requires a shift in thinking - seeing the relationship between land management and herd health, Kester said.

The Leopold Award, named after well-known conservationist Aldo Leopold, is given by the Sand County Foundation, California Farm Bureau Federation and Sustainable Conservation.

The Sand County Foundation, a private, non-profit group that works with landowners to improve habitat, will present conservation awards in seven states in 2008.

Brent Haglund, Sand County Foundation president, said that each year the selection committee finds a range of California ranchers and farmers who are doing good work for agriculture and the environment.

Vogt, he said, has been recognized as an agriculture leader for years. Now he will be recognized as a conservation leader, Haglund said.

Runners-up for the Leopold award were Howe Creek Ranch, Jill and Steve Hackett of Ferndale and Montna Farms owner Al Montna of Yuba City.

Vogt will receive the award, which comes with a \$10,000 cash prize, at the annual California Farm Bureau Federation meeting.

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