



This article was printed from the Green Guide section of the *Chico News & Review*, originally published January 15, 2009.

This article may be read online at: <http://www.newsreview.com/chico/Content?oid=896384>

Copyright ©2009 Chico Community Publishing, Inc.

Printed on 2009-01-15.

## Home on the range

### Elk Creek cattle rancher Chet Vogt balances profitability and environmental sustainability

By [Christine G.K. LaPado](#)

**New Year’s Eve day was crisp, cold and sunny** on Chet Vogt’s Three Creeks Ranch, unlike the heavy, damp fogginess left behind in Chico.

The youthful-looking, 64-year-old cattle rancher gave a tour up and down the grassy hills of his 5,300-acre ranch near the tiny Glenn County town of Elk Creek and a major-league stone’s throw away from Mendocino National Forest to the west.

Sitting on the driver’s side of a hardy, two-seat, four-wheel-drive Yamaha Rhino, Vogt parked atop one of the ranch’s rolling hills, displaying the striking vast beauty of the place—its three creeks (Briscoe, Mad and Clover); the fresh air; the yellows, greens and browns of the various native grasses; and the sounds of different birds twittering in nearby trees.

Vogt pointed toward the south end of his expansive property, beyond the horizon—to fenced pasture in which his herd of 500 cows was currently grazing. He referred to the chirping birds as “indicators of land health,” along with the native perennial grasses that carpet the hills of Three Creeks.

“When I bought this place, there were no bird sounds,” he said.

**At the annual convention of the California Farm Bureau Federation** last month in the Bay Area, Vogt (pronounced “vote”) was named the California winner of the 2008 Leopold Conservation Award—presented by Wisconsin nonprofit conservation group Sand County Foundation, California Farm Bureau Federation and Sustainable Conservation—and named after pioneering, world-renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold.

One private agricultural landowner from each of seven states—California, Texas, Colorado, Nebraska, Wisconsin, Wyoming and Utah—was recognized for “extraordinary achievement in voluntary conservation,” based on three criteria—ecological sensitivity and sustainability, economic sustainability, and community and civic leadership.

Vogt was honored for his 35 years of environmentally and economically sustainable ranching practices—17 of them on Three Creeks Ranch—resulting in healthy soil, water, native vegetation and bird life, and healthy cattle.

David Allen, vice president of operations for Sand County Federation, reached by phone in Wisconsin recently, praised Vogt’s management of the land, describing him as a rancher who “listen[s] to his land” and adapts his ranching practices accordingly.



#### CONSCIOUS COWBOY

Chet Vogt’s longstanding commitment to sustainable ranching has paid off in more ways than one. In addition to reaping the benefits of keeping healthy land and waterways, Vogt was named a winner of the 2008 Leopold Conservation Award, an honor that carries a \$10,000 prize.

Photo By Christine G.K. LaPado



**WHAT A VIEW**

Three Creeks Ranch in the western Glenn County town of Elk Creek is something to behold. The 5,300-acre property is home to colorful rolling hills, an abundance of wildlife and (obviously) three creeks.

Photo By Christine G.K. LaPado

“What Chet is doing on the land is leaving it better than he found it,” Allen said. “His enterprise is economically sustainable. ... The next owner of the land, whether it’s his son or someone else takes over, can pick up where he left off and be able to make a living as well as [he does]. ... Chet is also serving a tremendous role in creating a bridge between the agricultural community and the environmental community. And that’s huge.”

**Vogt—a former Los Banos-area rancher** who manages two other ranches, in Colusa and Merced counties—bought his Elk Creek ranch in 1992 when it was “badly abused after seven years of drought, bank foreclosure and absentee management—a veritable desert.” He saw “the opportunity, the potential” of the property, and “came out and just went to work.”

Guided by what he had learned from a week-long intensive course from the Fairfield-based,

environmentally friendly Ranching for Profit School (plus “basic college training and life experience”), Vogt created his holistic approach to cattle grazing: He rotates his cows among 32 fenced paddocks for six months out of the year, so that each pasture is used for only six or seven days a year—giving grasses (and their soil-nourishing roots) the opportunity to regrow from a healthy state of not being chewed down to the ground. (By way of a permit, his cattle spend the other six months of the year on public lands in Alturas.)

He has also fenced off sensitive riparian areas, in which his cows are allowed to graze only in “very short, high-intensity time periods.”

Overgrazed ground results in a lot of surface runoff of water, but under Vogt’s management, the perennial plants on the property have regenerated significantly, helping aid water penetration and increasing subsurface moisture. His practices have caused a restoration of springs that used to be dry.

Vogt often hosts workshops and leads field trips at Three Creeks—for fellow ranchers, students and environmental scientists—and he seems perfectly suited for the job—presenting a palatable crash course in grazing management (also known as rotational grazing), as well as lessons on the ranch’s soil, geology, plants, animal and bird life—the black-tailed deer and wild pigs, and the hawks, thrushes, yellowthroats and warblers.

**On the way back to the rustic, solar-powered** ranch house he shares with his fiancée, Angela, who helps train the ranch’s cattle-herding horses, Vogt—whose father was a farmer/rancher in western Merced County—shared the story of how he came to his unconventional way of ranching.

“As a kid, [my dad and I] went around to different ranches,” he said. “Some were nice, and some were barren. I didn’t know what the difference was at the time, but I knew that my ranch someday was going to be one of the bountiful places.

“Grazing management is an art,” offered Vogt. “We are dealing out here with fragile renewable resources, resources that need to be managed. ... Everything ties together. Each thing is one piece of the puzzle.”

Vogt’s commitment to the health of his land is evident; nevertheless the cattleman pointed out that making a living plays a significant role in his efforts.

“I’m out here to make the land a better place, number one. Number two, I’m out here to make money,” he said. “Actually, the money may be more important. Without a profit motive, most ranchers don’t have the ability to manage the lands. So—the ecology and the economy are closely tied together.”

Vogt acknowledged that his sustainable ranching methods are “a way of the future. It just depends on when that future is.”