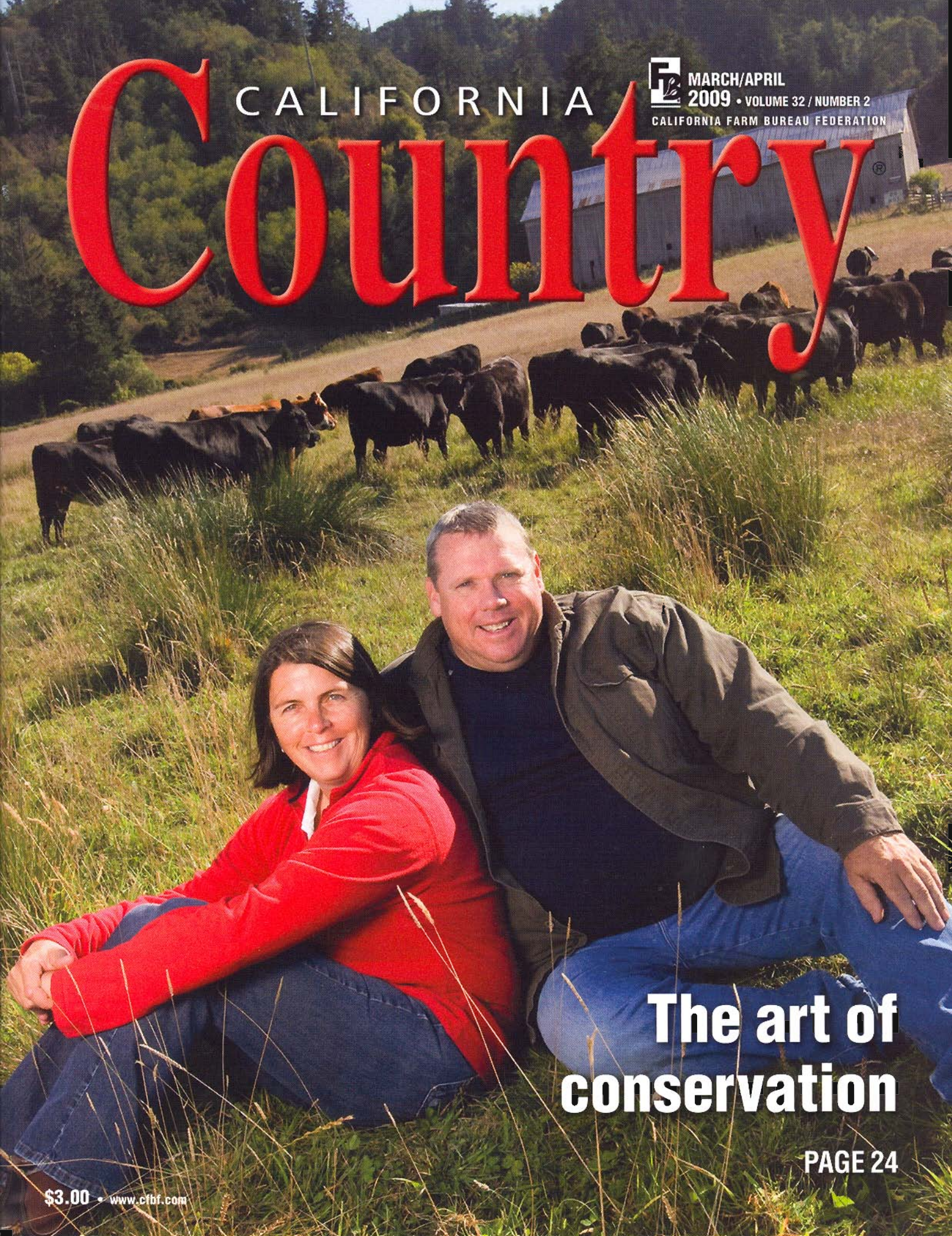

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The art of conservation

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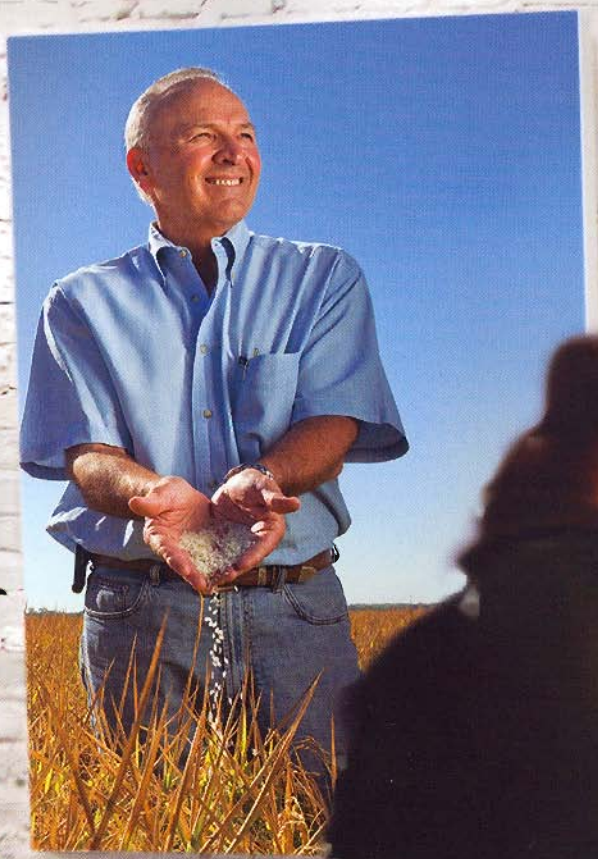
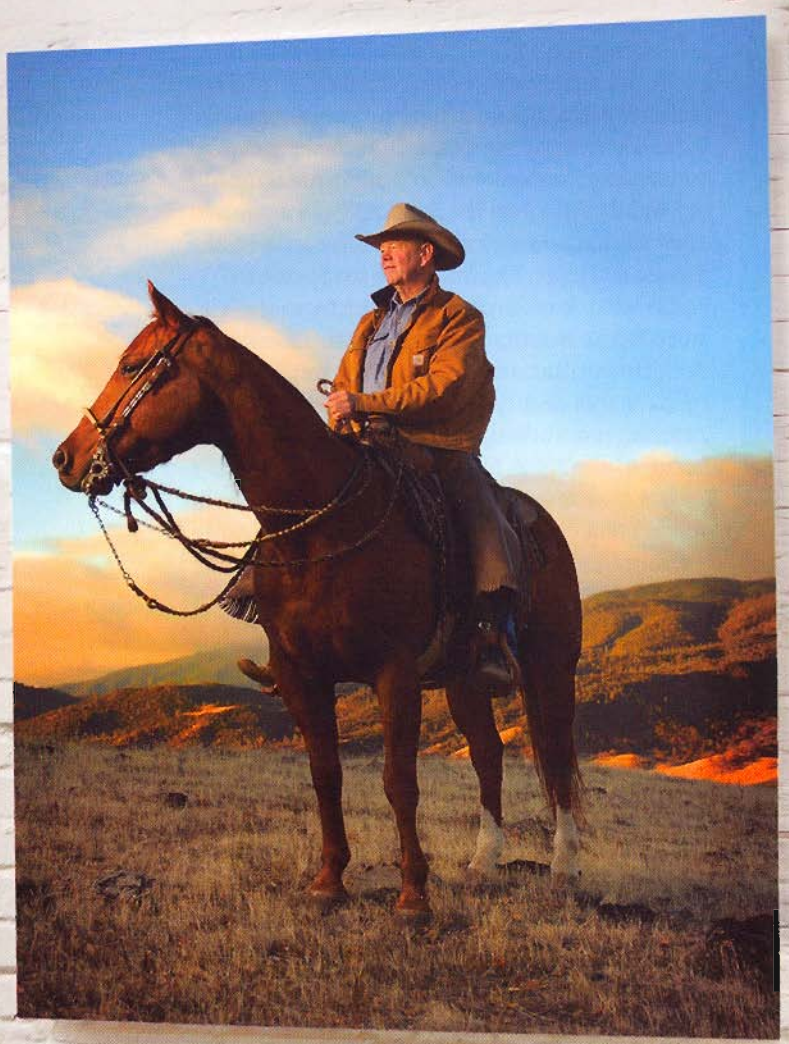




Story by **Sharlene Garcia** • Photos by **Paolo Vescia**

conservation

Leopold Conservation Award recognizes innovation and dedication

Legendary lover of the land Aldo Leopold once said, "When land does well for its owner, and the owner does well by his land; when both end up better by reason of their partnership, we have conservation."

Farmers and ranchers throughout California live by messages like this one. With more than half the state's land in private hands, landowners play a crucial role in protecting the environment and providing habitat for wildlife, all while maintaining a safe and affordable food supply for consumers.

Many of these landowners are visionaries who have made it their life's pursuit to look after the land they tend. They spend their nights dreaming up innovative ways to improve the land that sustains them and they spend their days implementing these ideas, learning along the way that some will succeed and some will fail.

Their dedication to improving the land for future generations has earned three of them the honor of being named finalists for California's Leopold Conservation Award. Of the three, Glenn County rancher Chet Vogt was named the winner. The award, presented by the Sand County Foundation, in partnership with Sustainable Conservation and the California Farm Bureau Federation, recognizes extraordinary achievement in voluntary conservation.

From raising cattle to growing rice, this year's honorees have a lot to be proud of. These families have made conservation an art—and although it is not always easy, they work to share what they have learned with anyone who will listen.

Chet Vogt
Three Creeks Ranch

Leopold Conservation Award Winner
Elk Creek, Glenn County

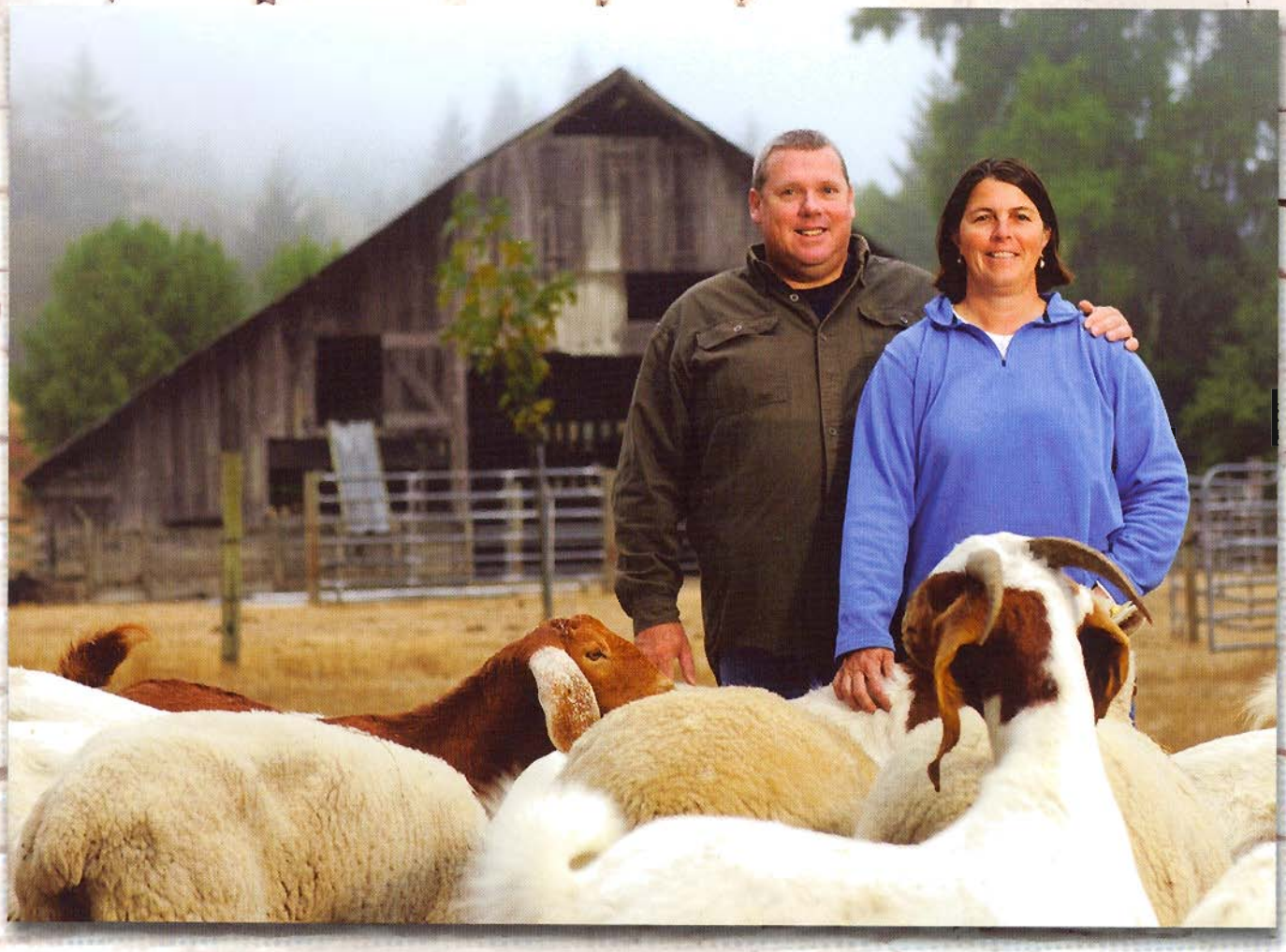
Providing nourishment, habitat and beauty for humans and animals alike is what Chet Vogt strives for at his Three Creeks Ranch in Glenn County. This 5,300-acre, 500-cow/calf operation is more than Vogt ever could have imagined when he bought it 16 years ago. He was able to see past the barren, desert-like state the ranch was in and develop it into something that is alive with wildlife and is economically sustainable.

The core of Vogt's holistic approach to ranching is intensive managed grazing, which rotates the cattle among 32 fenced paddocks. This supports native grasses, healthy cattle and increased water retention in the soil. Vogt has also fenced off riparian corridors and livestock ponds as special management zones. These zones receive short-duration grazing so that native plants can thrive and provide abundant nesting habitat for birds and other wildlife, including tricolor blackbirds, box turtles, California quail and blacktail deer.

"If I were to measure failures and successes, the failures would have a lot more marks in the box than the success," said Vogt. "We have had a lot of success, but pioneering so many of these management practices has led to a number of failures. There is no book written on what we are doing out here. We are writing the book as we go."

Vogt is widely respected for bridging the gap between cattle ranchers and environmental advocates, forging effective partnerships and cultivating productive, ongoing communication.

He frequently hosts workshops and field trips on Three Creeks Ranch to educate ranchers, regulators and environmental scientists about his practices. He has held numerous community leadership positions and knows the importance of helping the public understand that private landowners play a major role in conservation success.



Steve and Jill Hackett, Howe Creek Ranch

Leopold Conservation Award Finalist

Ferndale, Humboldt County

Steve and Jill Hackett have taken a proactive approach to integrating ecological sustainability into their 4,000 acres of forests and cattle pastures, where the family has ranched and produced forest products for 95 years.

"I went away to college and I didn't realize what was here until I was gone," said Steve Hackett. "I had taken it all for granted."

Their forestry practices, cemented by a conservation easement, create corridors of mature forest and healthy watersheds that support salmon, spotted owls and other wildlife. The Hacketts' approach to land management can be seen in everything they do on their land. They believe ownership is temporary, soil is everything and a landowner should never do harm to the land.

Their work in developing the California Rangeland Water Quality Management Plan is credited with injecting incentives and cooperation into ranch planning and program implementation and with engaging environmental groups, industry groups and federal and state government agencies effectively. The plan now includes more than 1 million acres of private California ranchland.

Alfred G. Montna, Montna Farms

Leopold Conservation Award Finalist

Yuba City, Sutter County

Sustainable conservation involves those in agriculture finding practical ways to protect our water, air and land. Rice grower Al Montna does all three on his 2,500-acre farm in Sutter County. Through a variety of conservation practices, Montna has created extensive and much-needed habitat for wildlife on his property.

"We look at it as just part of our cultural practices on the farm," said Montna. "Our land is producing something 12 months a year, but without the agriculture, the rest would not exist."

Montna led the way in replacing the practice of burning rice stubble with environmentally safe alternatives. He has also cut his water usage in half and recently installed a solar power system that helps power the Montna Farms Rice Dryer.

Known for bringing people together, Montna has held leadership positions in numerous industry organizations and public policy boards, such as the Northern California Water Association, California Bay-Delta Authority and State Board of Food and Agriculture.

Sharlene Garcia is a reporter for the California Farm Bureau Federation. She can be reached at 800-698-FARM or sgarcia@cfbf.com.