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Sunol rancher is home on the range

Ranchers, conservation groups unite to act as stewards of the land

Rancher Tim Koopmann, whose projects earned him the 2011 California Leopold Conservation Award, recently led a tour of his 850 acres off the freeway just south of Pleasanton.

"Every rancher I see is a steward of the land," Koopmann said

Koopmann is in his element roaming his ranch.

"My grandfather bought this land in 1918," Koopmann said. "We've been adapting, changing, making it work. My children and I are the first to have to hold outside jobs."

Koopmann, 59, is a Watershed Resource Specialist with the city of San Francisco Water Department, and daughter Carrie and son Clayton also work in related fields although they keep cattle at the family ranch.

He noted that things were tough after a winter with scant rains; he had to buy feed for his herd of 150 cattle. He also had to make decisions about selling off young cattle to be raised to maturity at other ranches.

Tim and Melinda Koopmann welcomed 100 visitors to their ranch in the spring for a barbecue lunch in the barn, where a sign hangs stating: "Every day is Earth Day on my ranch."

The visitors then piled into 12 vehicles to travel the rough ranch roads and view Koopmann's conservation projects, which earned him the 2011 California Leopold Conservation Award.

Tim Koopmann stood on the green hillside and pointed out the murky pond in the distance, which he said formed in an indentation resulting from the 1906 earthquake.

"This pond is unsightly by most standards -- there's no emerging vegetation or canopy cover," he said.

But it's perfect for salamanders, he explained. Their predators -- bullfrogs and bats -- can't see them through the dense water.

Ranchers and conservation groups are increasingly building relationships as those protecting natural resources recognize that ranchers have long been stewards of the earth.

"I'm here to let the general public know that farmers and ranchers are conservationists," Kevin Kiley, director of communications and outreach for Sand County Foundation, told the lunch guests. "The folks in this barn are testament."

He traveled from Madison, Wisc., where Sand County works on the exchange of ideas among environmentalists.

Ed Burton, a California State Conservationist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, was on the panel that chose the winners of the 2011 California Leopold Conservation Award.

"There are so many ranchers and families in California that are excellent stewards of the land. It was really hard to judge," Burton said. "Our mission is to help people help the land -- they can make money and be in harmony with the land."

"These efforts are more important than ever now," he added. "The population in California is 37 million, and by 2050 has the potential to be 60 million."

Dr. Lynn Huntsinger, professor of Rangeland Ecology and Management at UC Berkeley, noted that Tim and Melinda Koopmann are great educational partners.

"They've met with students and hosted them," she said. "Students have no idea what goes on here. Both of them have made the trek onto the Berkeley campus to teach them."

She explained that the Koopmann ranch is an annual grassland, which grows from seed every year.

"Grazing is an important conservation tool, and grazing doesn't happen in a vacuum," Huntsinger said. "You don't have cows helicoptered in, they have to be husbanded -- you need a ranching community. Ranchers like this help preserve natural landscape."

"The stewardship effort was ingrained in me by my father and grandfather," Tim Koopmann said. "It's a work ethic."

"I love the land," he added. "We've treated it generation after generation the way it's meant to be treated."

He noted that he owes a debt to conservationists because thanks to the endangered California tiger salamander he was able to sell easements to parcels of his land that is their natural habitat and pay off a huge tax bill.

After his grandfather died in 1968, a federal tax liability of \$125,000 had been the impetus for Koopmann to leave the ranch to earn a degree and begin teaching. He made it back to the ranch after almost 10 years, hoping he was better equipped to deal with death taxes.

But when his parents, Herman Jr. and Tillyann, died in the early '90s, Koopmann found that he owed \$747,000 to the federal and state governments.

"It took 14 years to pay off," Koopmann said.

He sold some of his land, which has been developed into ranchettes off Highway 84, and other parcels to owners who built large homes, one with a helipad that he used to commute to Silicon Valley for awhile.

Then Koopmann sold two easements, funded by the city of Pleasanton, the California Department of Fish and Game, and a local developer to satisfy mitigation requirements. Koopmann is being paid to preserve the habitats in perpetuity.

One is the salamander pond on a 30-acre site.

"The California Tiger Salamander -- that's the most lucrative livestock," Koopmann said with a laugh.

The other is a 107-acre easement on the border with Pleasanton's Callippe Preserve Golf Course, which satisfied the environmental needs for that development in 2005.

At first the easement was fenced off to encourage wild flowers, especially violas, to grow, Koopmann recalled.

"None grew there although they were growing on my land," Koopmann said. "The land needed grazing, it needed management."

Now a gate allows his cattle to graze the easement, and the wildflowers bloom on the edge of the golf course.

The Koopmann ranch also has 75 bird boxes on the property, erected by Irv Tiesen of the Ohlone Audubon Society as part of its recovery program.

The placement of the boxes took some experimentation, Koopmann recalled. At first they were placed too low and a bobcat got into all of them.

Koopmann also developed a watershed management plan recognized throughout the state and even the world, according to Alex Karolyi of Sustainable Conservation. Solar-powered pumps draw from a spring for reliable water for the cattle and wildlife at three pastures.

Tim Koopmann was one of the foremost voices in the California Cattlemen's Association and has come to have a leading role in the California Rangeland Trust as he combines his stewardship of the land with actively preserving endangered habitats.

The 30-acre easement to save the salamander was one of the first mitigation deals arranged by the California Rangeland Trust. The preserved habitat on the Koopmann ranch also lessens the value of the land, thereby lowering future tax bills.

"Some people talk about conservation, species protection, and sustainable agriculture. Tim Koopmann gets it done," Paul Banke of the Alameda County Resource Conservation District said in a letter that recommended Koopmann for the 2011 California Leopold Conservation Award. "He has shown all of us that the environmental community and ranchers can work together and achieve good things."

"Every rancher I see is a steward of the land," Koopmann said as he acknowledged his award. "I'm not special in any way."

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