

Effective Conservation-Oriented Grazing Management Plans and Grazing Leases for California Rangelands

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Livestock grazing is often the most effective and economical tool to manage the non-native grasses and forbs of California's Mediterranean grasslands and oak savannas for conservation of biodiversity. Without management like grazing, these plants can grow very tall and dense during normal and above-normal precipitation years, thus compromising habitat quality for special-status plants and animals. The challenges for managers are to maximize the benefits of grazing while minimizing its negative effects, and to integrate conservation theory and practical experience into grazing management plans and leases. The details in these documents can significantly affect conservation results.

Key Elements of a Grazing Lease for Conservation Purposes:

- Do not include elements of the Grazing Management Plan (GMP) in the lease; refer to and append the GMP, which will be adapted based on monitoring
- Make leases long-term as an incentive for lessee stewardship investment
- Define rangeland management (stewardship) activities that may be eligible for lease fee credits (refer to handout)
- Select lessee from among applicants based on experience with conservation, local capabilities and supplementary grazing lands, and percentage for new young operators (possibly in partnership with an older mentor)
- Educate and celebrate stewardship, enlisting participation by the lessee

Lessons from Nature Conservation Theory for Rangeland Management:

- Sustainability of complex ecosystems (with critical services) can be dependent on a sustainable ranching industry and community
- Management objectives must be feasible with specified expectations for targeted areas and resources
- Collaboration between agencies and ranchers works best to achieve management results
- Local community education, recreation, and participation in policy/planning are critical
- Incentives work better than penalties
- Resilience capabilities by the lessee and landowner (to extreme weather and economies) is important to recognize and support
- Private sector conservation is increasing (lands ownership and management; grazing leases on public lands; and stewardship services for public lands)



Common Mistakes:

- Expecting the grazing operator to follow an inflexible schedule of stocking rates, timing, grazing system, or short-term demands to change
- Completely eliminating grazing from a sensitive area that could benefit from targeted short-term grazing (such as riparian areas) instead of modifying season of use
- Not offering incentives to meet conservation performance objectives and deal with changing site conditions
- Disallowing the lessee from performing stewardship activities, which often can be performed at less cost than the landowner's



Other Key Planning Strategies and Elements to Support an Ecologically and Economically Sustainable Grazing Operation:

- Translation of species needs into practical management terms (define habitat requirements and management to target that habitat with appropriate season of grazing and any restrictions)
- Performance-based monitoring (define goals, objectives, performance standards, and monitoring methods, with which to assess monitoring results and judge when to adapt the plan)
- Designating grazing fields for either special management (habitat) or flexible use (auxiliary non-habitat fields that can be grazed less during high production years and more during low production years)

