

# Ranching Sustainability Analysis<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

California oak woodland creates a landscape of renowned beauty, providing the public with essential natural resource services and economic values through ranching. Ranchers however, come under intense pressure and scrutiny from the public to demonstrate stewardship of the land they manage. The solution often chosen to address these concerns is, simply, more regulations. Regulations impose a financial and philosophical burden on California ranchers; in fact, they threaten the very existence of ranching. This paper discusses the development and on-going implementation of the Ranching Sustainability Analysis System (RSA). The RSA is a self-assessment process that guides the rancher through a series of questions that cover social, economic, and natural resource aspects of 11 ranch-management categories. Ranch scores can be submitted to a confidential database. Anonymous summary scores allow ranchers to compare the operation to their peers and to track sustainability progress over time. Essential components for the ongoing implementation of the RSA have been the strong support of an ad hoc committee of ranchers, delivery through a series of workshops, San Luis Obispo County Cattlemen's Association support, and voluntary participation. Although in the early stages of implementation, the RSA has potential to aid private landowners throughout California in implementing and demonstrating sustainable ranching practices.

*Key words:* oak woodland, land stewardship, ranching sustainability analysis

## Introduction

Ranchers continue to come under intense pressure and scrutiny from environmentalists and the public in general to demonstrate their stewardship of the land and natural resources they manage. However, ranchers feel that the solution often chosen to address the public's natural resource concerns is simply more regulations which imposes a financial and philosophical burden on ranchers; in fact, they threaten their very existence. As Jack Varian, owner of V6 Ranch, in Parkfield, California puts it: "Eventually the pinpricks (regulations) to the elephant (ranching) will bring it down. If we can teach the public what ranchers do, why they do it, and how ranching benefits the larger community, we can increase public acceptance of ranching. Ranchers own 80 percent of the oak woodland in San Luis Obispo County. If the Ranch Sustainability Analysis System can assist in enhancing the social, economic, and natural resource sustainability of ranches such that the ranches can stay in the family, so will the oaks stay on the land."

It is vital for ranchers to be able to demonstrate that they are good stewards of the land and yet be able to earn a living from the land they own. A Ranching Sustainability Analysis (RSA) system was developed by the Integrated Hardwood Range Management Program (IHRMP) and area ranchers on the central coast as one way to show that ranchers are managing properly.

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The mission of the RSA is to create and implement a voluntary self-assessment program in which ranchers can evaluate all aspects of their operations to ensure the sustainability of their production, lands, and families; to determine what they do well and find ways to ensure proper stewardship of themselves, their animals, and their natural resources.

## How does it work?

The Ranching Sustainability Analysis is a self-assessment process that guides the rancher in asking a series of questions within 11 subject categories about the social, economic, and natural resource management practices he or she is using. These categories are: livestock management, soil management, forage management, biodiversity/wildlife, regulations, relationships, economics, energy, monitoring, pest management, and water quality.

Ranching does not lend itself easily to a “one size fits all” approach, so the expertise of the ranchers, their in-depth and long-term knowledge of their own lands, is vital to this process. There are up to nine questions per category. Users score their practices from 1 to 7 (poor to excellent). Please see the whole RSA document at: [http://cesanluisobispo.ucanr.edu/Custom\\_Program743/Ranching\\_Sustainability\\_Self-Assessment\\_Project/](http://cesanluisobispo.ucanr.edu/Custom_Program743/Ranching_Sustainability_Self-Assessment_Project/).

The following are three examples selected from the RSA demonstrating how the scoring works. The photos are only used to demonstrate a potential low versus high score. All scoring is done by the rancher based on their understanding of his ranch. Different members of the same family, or employee’s on the same ranch, may score each question differently, which then allows for a discussion as to why they scored it differently. This allows for the family and employees to be more unified in their management practices. Photos in figures 1 through 3 provide an example of how this scoring works.



Figure 1—A question from the category of *Wildlife/Biodiversity*: How well do you meet the habitat needs of game species? The photo on the left represents poor wildlife habitat and would receive a score of two. The photo on the right represents healthy wildlife habitat and would receive a score of six.

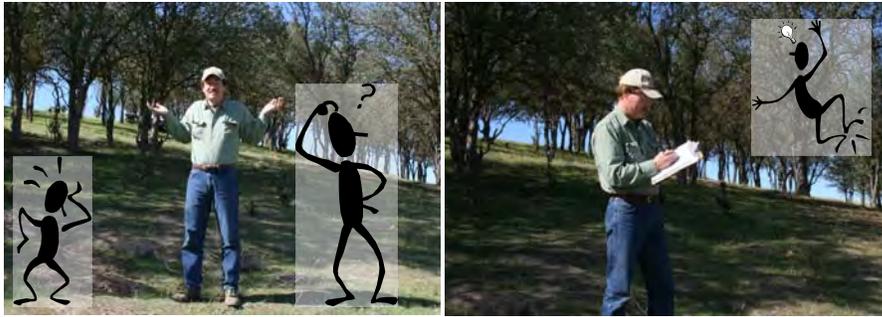


Figure 2—A question from category of Relationships: Family, Employee, Community, and Land: How well have you and your family established written goals that are clearly defined and inclusive of everyone in your operation? The photo on the left has no written goals and would receive a score of one. The photo on the right represents strong written goals and would receive a score of six.



Figure 3—A Question from the category of Economics: How diversified is your income, e.g., multi-species operation, rental property, hunting, and agritourism? The photo on the left represents having livestock only and would receive a score of three, while the photo on the right represents additional income from other resources and would receive a score of six.

Once a rancher, or family, has gone through the whole document, ranch scores can be submitted to a confidential database, or kept by the individual. Individual ranch, and industry summaries, allows ranchers to compare their individual operation over time, and to compare with their peers. Therefore the industry would be able to track sustainability progress over time. This process will help individuals and families to identify specific “action items” that they wish to pursue to improve their operations. There are at least seven good reasons that a rancher may want to complete this self-assessment. These reasons are:

- Presents a fast and easy way to create their written record.
- Fosters communication among family, employees, and agencies.
- Demonstrates their dedication to stewardship.
- Stimulates creative thinking about good ranching practices.
- Acts as a non-regulatory tool that may help them with regulators.
- Provides a new way to measure their practices leading to additional profitability.
- Developed by ranchers who understand the needs of ranchers and land managers.

## Results to date

The past several years, using a grant from the Wildlife Conservation Board’s Oak Woodland Conservation Act of 2001, the project has focused on connecting with the agricultural and environmental communities. Great progress has been made through the efforts of an impressive committee of local private landowners and ranch managers who are recognized locally and nationally as outstanding land stewards. The Rancher Committee believes that the RSA can be a powerful tool to guide private landowners through everyday decision-making processes. The Committee is fully committed to seeing this effort through to completion. Importantly, this tool could be adapted for use throughout California. Supporting the RSA, the Integrated Hardwood Management Program (IHRMP) has held workshops and tailgate meetings to stimulate discussion and interest in sustainable ranching among people with diverse experiences and backgrounds. We feel that a win-win situation is in the making. That is, if ranching is sustained, so also will working landscapes (oak woodlands) continue to provide a diversity of livestock and other agricultural products; high quality water supplies; wildlife habitat; recreational opportunities; and aesthetic values.

The RSA will also provide a means for the academic community to assess the needs of the ranchers. For example, some results obtained during recent workshops presented on the Central Coast show some management topics that UC Cooperative Extension, or other agencies, could focus on workshops and provide more information to land owners and managers. Figure 4 shows results from a workshop showing that the percentage of ranchers considering a conservation easement is highly varied, suggesting that a workshop may be needed to provide technical information of what a conservation easement is and how it could be a useful tool to help keep ranches solvent. Results from fig. 5 show that most of the ranchers have not established written goals for their ranch, suggesting that a workshop on how to do establish written goals would be a priority topic for a workshop. At the same time, the results from fig. 6 suggest that most ranchers are very good at following the labels for vaccine, medicine and chemical use, suggesting that it may not be necessary at this time to do a workshop on how to use vaccines, medicines, or chemicals.

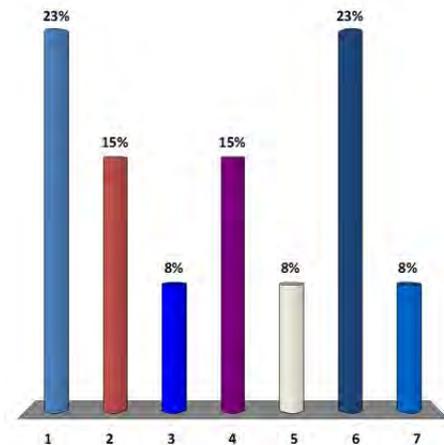


Figure 4—Results of responses from the category Biodiversity/Wildlife Conservation: “To what extent have you considered a conservation easement?”

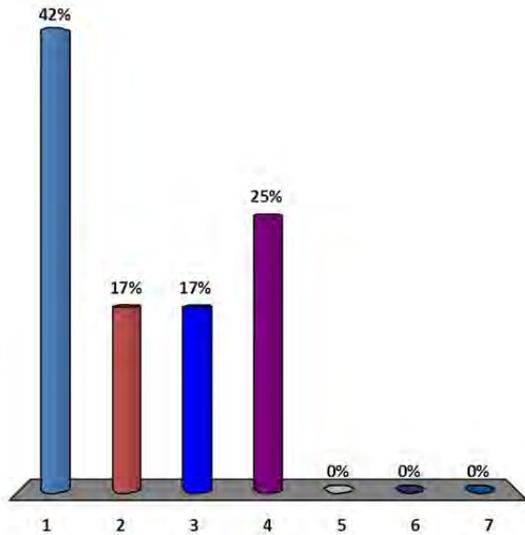


Figure 5—Results of responses from the category, Relationships: Family, Employee, Community, Land.

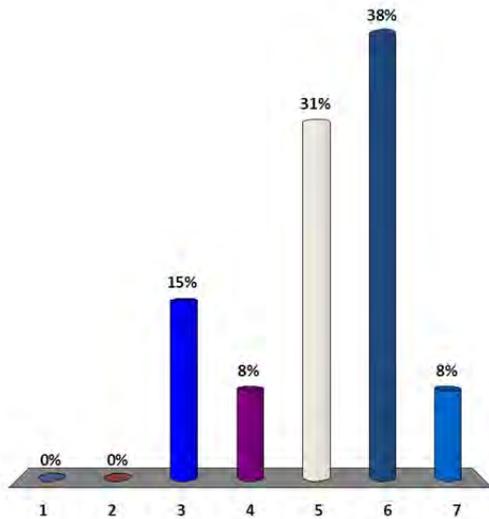


Figure 6—Results of responses from the category Regulations and Regulators: “How well do you follow labels when using vaccines, medications, chemicals?”

## Future directions

The Ranching Sustainability Analysis will evolve to meet the needs of the California ranching community and to reflect increasing understanding of rangeland sustainability and good stewardship practices. The written components of the RSA may be considered a “living document” that develops and matures over time. Our plans include the following:

- Pilot the RSA, including the development of a confidential database.
- A workbook with state-of-the-art educational materials on rangeland practices.
- A website with Interactive Model Ranch to illustrate some of the social, economic, and natural resource sustainable practices used by California ranchers.
- Third-party certification that would provide unbiased confirmation of the sustainability of ranch practices for peers, regulatory agencies, the environmental community, and the general public.
- Develop partnerships with ranching associations and other organizations.