



Trust helping to preserve ranchlands -- and wildlife

By Denis Cuff
Contra Costa Times

Posted: 02/13/2010 09:24:31 PM PST

Updated: 02/16/2010 05:13:35 AM PST

As a young boy growing up on a Sunol ranch, Tim Koopmann liked to watch California tiger salamanders slither through the mud into a livestock pond to breed. The amphibians with yellow stripes were cool stuff to take to show-and-tell at school, but he didn't see they had another practical value.

Decades later, the salamanders saved his family's ranch, with the guidance of a conservation group formed by ranchers to protect ranching and, at the same time, wildlife.

"It turns out we're helping each other," Koopmann said during a recent visit to the old family pond used by salamanders for breeding and his Red Angus cattle for drinking. "That's good, because I believe ranching is about sustainable management of natural resources."

Both ranchers and wildlife are under siege these days from development pressures in the West. Grasslands are being chopped up into subdivisions.

Koopmann knows those pressures only too well. A few years ago, he painfully considered selling out to builders or speculators. His family owed \$750,000 in federal inheritance taxes on the ranch after his

To survive, he turned to an increasingly popular conservation tool: He sold his development rights and, in return, agreed to protect wildlife on his land.

The complicated deal, brokered by the ranchers' conservation group, known as the California Rangeland Trust, secured for Koopmann the money to pay off the taxes and keep his 850-acre ranch, nestled in the hilly Sunol grasslands towering above busy Interstate 680.

In exchange, Koopmann accepted a binding deed restriction — called a conservation easement — to manage 138 acres of his cattle ranch in a way that protects the wildlife, including the threatened salamander.

Koopmann, 57, also a grazing manager for San Francisco's water department, found his salvation in 2003 when a biologist told him about a developer who needed to fund a tiger salamander protection project as a condition of getting approval to build homes in San Jose.

Koopmann, the builder and the rangeland trust worked out a deal approved by state wildlife regulators.

The rangeland trust, modeled after similar preservation groups in Colorado and Montana, agreed to accept responsibility for monitoring Koopmann's ranch and its wildlife. The trust accepted an endowment from the builder to fund checkups on the Koopmann land.

Two years later, Koopmann made a second agreement. This one involved a developer seeking



developer paid Koopmann so he could protect 109 acres of his land that is prime habitat for the threatened California red-legged frog and plants that provide homes for the rare Callippe silverspot butterfly.

Once again, the rangeland trust accepted guardianship over the easement, taking responsibility for hiring biologists to inspect and monitor the land.

Koopmann was the first Bay Area rancher to strike such a deal with the rangeland trust, an emerging force in conservation.

Statewide, the rangeland trust holds conservation agreements to protect habitat on some 200,000 acres of California grazing land — making it one of the largest land trusts in California. Much of the land is in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties and in the Sierra foothills.

Now the group is pushing to preserve grasslands in the Bay Area — with help from \$170,000 in grants the past two years from the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund, a major environmental funder.

The Bay Area has 1.7 million acres of undeveloped rangeland that is suitable for grazing. About 1.3 million acres — an area 40 times the size of San Francisco — is privately owned. Since 1984, about 112,000 acres of that range land has been lost, much due to development, according to an analysis by GreenInfo Network.

"Cattle ranchers and wildlife have a big thing in common. They need large amounts of open space," said Tina Batt, who was hired last year as the rangeland trust's Bay Area program manager. "Protecting cattle ranches is one of the best and

preserving open space and protecting the clarity of our drinking water that flows over rangeland."

Conservation easements are cost-effective because wildlife gets protected without taxpayers having to bear the steep cost of buying and caring for the land, said John Donnelly, executive director of the California Wildlife Conservation Board, which has provided grants for conservation easements.

Rep. John Garamendi, D-Walnut Grove, a rancher and former California lieutenant governor, donated a conservation easement on his Calaveras County land to the rangeland trust.

With their children grown, the Garamendis faced a question familiar to many ranch families.

"What do you do?" he said. "The land will be worth a lot of money, but do you keep it in ranching? ... Money isn't everything."

The Garamendis provided some land to each of their children, and then placed a conservation easement on another big swath.

He predicted more ranchers and farmers will use conservation easements to preserve their agricultural heritage, but added that finding funds to buy the development rights will be a big challenge. Besides developers' fees, government grants also are used to obtain conservation easements, and they may be in short supply, he said.

Koopmann, a rangeland trust board member, said he takes pride that the salamanders keep returning and laying eggs in the pond his grandfather acquired with the ranch in 1918.



Cattle grazing, he said, prevents a buildup of vegetation that would block salamanders' path to migrate from underground burrows to ponds.

Livestock drinking the water prevents a buildup of aquatic water weeds that make a pond inhospitable for tiger salamanders, he said.

Koopmann sees the conservation agreements as an extension of his belief that ranchers and wildlife can live in harmony.

He has hosted workshops on his ranch on managing stock ponds for salamanders. He also invites birding groups to visit to see the network of bluebird boxes.

Near the Koopmann home, a pair of golden eagles have nested in a tree for years.

He likes to joke that the salamanders are the most valuable animals he has raised because they helped keep the ranch in the family and ready some day to be turned over to his son, Clayton, and daughter, Carissa. Both help Koopmann and his wife Melinda with the ranch in their spare time away from their weekday jobs in natural resource management.

It's good to know, he said, that the next generation will watch over the cattle and the salamanders.

Contact Denis Cuff at 925-943-8267. Read the Capricious Commuter blog at www.ibabuzz.com/transportation .

RANGELAND IN BAY AREA, BY COUNTY
The figures below show undeveloped land with soil, water and vegetation suitable to

land is used for grazing, especially in parcels below 320 acres that are hard to ranch profitably.

County Acreage

Sonoma 420,023

Santa Clara 390,090

Alameda 244,252

Solano 204,518

Napa 178,957

Contra Costa 168,904

Marin 89,556

San Mateo 48,958

Source: GreenInfo Network