



2014 Farm Bill Conservation Programs

Assisting California Ranchers

OVERVIEW

California has some of the most diverse rangelands in the nation—from alpine meadows to sage steppe, and from coastal prairie to Mediterranean annual grasses. Ranchers have been working to sustain their operations within these various ecosystems for generations. Many operations move livestock from low to high elevations to match available forage quality with their animals' nutritional needs. Other operations use irrigated pastures to sustain their livestock during the dry season. Taking care of livestock needs, while maintaining the health of the grazing lands, are interdependent management goals.

CONSERVATION PLANNING

For more than 75 years, NRCS has placed a high priority on helping agricultural producers meet their environmental and economic goals through conservation planning. A conservation plan is a written record of management goals, decisions and the conservation practices identified to maintain the sustainability of the ranch. A conservation plan often begins with identifying resource concerns (such as livestock concentration areas or erosion along stream banks) that keep ranchers from meeting their goals.

NRCS conservationists work one-on-one with ranchers to design a conservation plan that provides scientifically sound alternatives for accomplishing their goals. Conservation planning services are free and receiving technical assistance does not obligate ranchers to participate in Farm Bill programs. All services are voluntary and all information shared with NRCS for conservation planning purposes is strictly confidential. The conservation plan belongs to the rancher and can (and should!) adapt and change as the operation changes.

GRAZING PLAN

A grazing plan is a subset of a conservation plan. It helps ranchers design livestock movement patterns to address resource concerns. An early step in this collaborative planning process includes on-site visits by the NRCS conservationist to work with a rancher to understand the natural resources available on the ranch. The conservationist will inventory the soils types, the forage species and composition, the water sources and types, and other aspects of the ranch. NRCS can provide soils and forage composition maps for the rancher's use.

Using these tools NRCS can estimate average forage production that can be expected and determine the carrying capacity of the ranch. This information, along with the rancher's goals and resource concerns, are used to devise a grazing plan that will enhance resources while improving forage quality and animal health. Other likely components of the plan include current and potential fences, wildlife habitats, a contingency plan (when natural disaster occurs that reduces available forage), and a monitoring plan. Keeping in mind the variability of nature, these prescribed grazing plans must remain flexible to accommodate fluctuations in climate, forage production, and water availability.

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY INCENTIVES PROGRAM (EQIP)

EQIP provides financial and technical assistance to help ranchers (and other agricultural producers) address resource concerns using a mix of these and other conservation options: fencing, range or pasture planting, weed control, water development, livestock wells, brush management, riparian improvements, soil health improvements, grazing management, and upland wildlife habitat management.



Most EQIP contracts pay producers approximately half of the cost of structural or vegetative improvements. Payments may also include incentives to test—and possibly adopt—management practices that improve resource conditions. Payment rates are typically higher for those who have ranched less than 10 years (considered a beginning rancher) and for those with limited financial resources (defined on a county-by-county basis). Ranchers who have served in the U.S. Armed Services will receive an application preference in certain Farm Bill program application fund pools. Inquire with your local NRCS office for more information.

CONSERVATION STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM (CSP)

The CSP program provides technical and financial assistance to producers who already have applied the basic conservation practices and are willing and able to implement a higher level of conservation on their operation. Producers participating under CSP receive incentive payments for the specified higher levels of conservation treatment. Ranchers can choose from a suite of CSP enhancements. Typical ranch CSP enhancements include monitoring key grazing areas, improving pasture irrigation, rotation of supplement and feeding areas, improving wildlife habitat, intensive rotational grazing, managing calving to coincide with forage availability, and other options.

HOW TO APPLY

Persons interested in participating in EQIP or any other programs should contact their local NRCS field office. Applications are taken year-round at all NRCS field offices. Eligible projects will be periodically evaluated and prioritized for funding.

For more information on NRCS Farm Bill conservation programs, visit:

www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/ca/programs/

Ranching Practices Available

NRCS offers technical and financial assistance on conservation practices for healthy ranching. Here are available conservation practices ranches throughout California:



HERBACEOUS WEED CONTROL

Removal or control of herbaceous weeds including invasive, noxious and prohibited plants to enhance the quality and quantity of forage, prevent wildfire, and create desired plant communities.



BRUSH MANAGEMENT

Removal of woody debris to restore natural plant community balance, restore vegetative cover, and enhance wildlife habitat.



FENCING

Construction of a barrier to control the movement of animals or vehicles. May be permanent or temporary based on need.



LIVESTOCK WELL AND WATER FACILITY

Installation of a permanent or portable device to provide an adequate amount and quality of drinking water for livestock and or wildlife.



RANGE AND PASTURE PLANTING

Establishing herbaceous species suitable for pasture or hay production to provide or increase forage supply for livestock nutrition.



PRESCRIBED GRAZING

Managing the harvest of vegetation with grazing and/or browsing animals to improve desired species composition and improve riparian and watershed function.