



Transhumant Ranchers in California's Oak Woodlands: Implications for Ecosystem Conservation

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There is a strong link between some of the richest, most productive lands of the western United States, including California's oak woodlands, and the traditional "transhumance" of ranchers using public ranges. Oak woodland ranchers with government grazing leases report that about half of their income stems from using government-owned montane ranges. For many, loss of these leases reduces their ranch productive capacity to a level insufficient for sustainability, augmenting the sale of ranch lands for development. Many thousands of hectares of oak woodlands are linked to the fate of government leases in this way, and this linkage limits the opportunities for conservation of oak woodlands as "working landscapes" via conservation easements. This type of conservation is the fastest growing type in California today.

The first case study shows that over the past 100 years there has been a reduction in access to the natural resources needed for transhumance from three sources: competition from use of the pastures for recreation and nature preservation, management practices that have brought about change in the character of the natural resources themselves, and urban sprawl. Ranchers are leasing other properties, purchasing feed, and transporting animals to other regions to compensate. Most had increased their privately leased land over the previous five years. Though they desire to stay on their ranches, transhumant ranching is becoming increasingly difficult because of land use changes on both public and private lands and a third of ranchers believe that they may need to sell the property for development if they lose their summer permits. There are many "line camps" on Forest Service range—cabins that families or workers would stay in during the summer to tend the cattle. However, the need to support the ranch with work in town limits the ability of the household to participate in transhumance or even travel into the mountains to check on the animals. For ranching to continue, mobility is one of several key factors, but as this case study demonstrates there are many obstacles facing ranchers who need to move their cattle from winter to summer forage.

In the second case study many similar factors are operating to suppress transhumance, including fire suppression and stocking reductions. Change in land use, with the construction of a major reservoir on grazing lands, also reduced grazing on the National Forest. Family demographics, with more ranchers working off ranch, were becoming an important factor making transhumance more difficult. As in the first study, regulations were emphasized by some ranchers as a problem, and regulations and economic factors were the main reason former permit holders had given up their permits.

The case studies reveal that factors constraining and reducing grazing on transhumance range are fundamentally linked to insecurity of tenure on high elevation range, loss of grazing capacity from vegetation change as traditional management methods are forbidden, development and land use change as the surrounding society encroaches into pastoral areas and other uses take priority on public lands, and changes in family economy and goals. The publically owned range upon which transhumance depends are no longer managed to maintain open lands and grazing areas, and traditional ranch practices like burning vegetation have been suppressed. Goals for these lands have changed away from grazing, as the majority society seeks other things from public lands, and increased regulation reduces grazing flexibility and available forage. As more members of ranch families work longer off the ranch, they are less able to spend summer tending stock in the mountains. Development and land use change not only affect ranchers in general, reducing the amount of forage, displacing infrastructure, and making traditional practices more difficult, these factors seem to affect transhumant ranchers more than those who

are more sedentary. Transhumant ranchers have been using rangelands longer, and are more committed to the traditions of pastoralism, than more sedentary pastoralists. Ranchers in general seek to acquire more access to forage through leasing additional lands from a variety of sources.

As is apparent from the case studies, many ranchers lease land from private landowners. Ironically these may be properties in transition to development, or ranches where the heirs or owners do not want to engage in ranching directly. But there is more than just a forage base that is needed for ranch production—there is also an infrastructural base that is needed. This may be termed a “critical mass” (Huntsinger and Hopkinson, 1996). Ranchers need the community of ranchers for both what we might call loosely “cultural support,” but also for labor needs during particular times of the year (Liffmann et al. 2000). The sale of each range hastens the sale of the next, creating a feedback loop that results in the conversion of wooded lands to housing and urban development.