



# From Ranchers Born

## The California Rangeland Trust is changing attitudes about how ranch land can be protected – and stay productive

BY DUSTI SCOVEL

Every coin has a flip side and when it comes to conservation easements, Nita Vail and the California Rangeland Trust (CRT) have the shiny side of the coin. Nita is the Executive Director of CRT and what this nonprofit is doing for California's rangeland through conservation easements is exactly the way these instruments were intended to work. When Nita told the story that ranchers started the organization in 1998, it made perfect sense.

I know. I've not had a lot of good things to say about these instruments and I still urge caution when dealing with what appears to be "the Calvary" riding in to save the day.

That, in fact, is one of the most significant differences between CRT and the Nature Conservancy, the world's richest conservation group. TNC targets properties they, or one of their government partners, want and they literally pursue the land. As I've mentioned in earlier articles, TNC has a Board of Directors that reads like a who's who from major investment firms. CRT, on the other hand, has a waiting list of sixty ranchers who *want* to put their land into conservation easements with the nonprofit and their Board of Directors is made up of ranchers and ranching people.

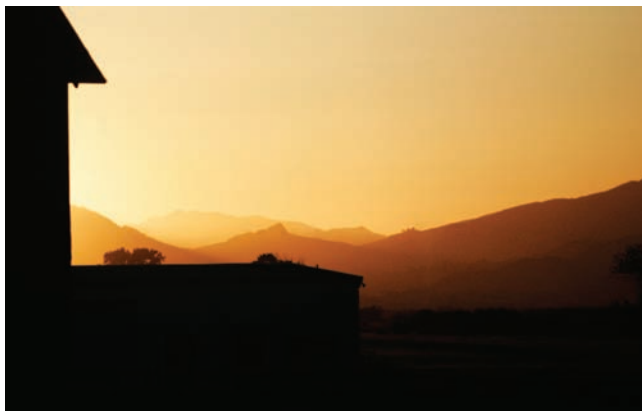
Each conservation easement is written differently because every ranching operation is different. Some conservation easements are written to allow for additional buildings and/or homes to accommodate future generations of families that will live and work on the land.

Many include provisions specific only to that property and its operation. CRT is diligent about working with ranchers to insure they understand all the provisions of their conservation easement and have done due diligence in terms of anticipating future generation's needs.

CRT's focus is to provide qualified alternatives directly to landowners. By collaborating with other conservation organizations, the CRT works to raise public awareness and is ever aware of the need to generate funding for rangeland protection. They currently have over 400,000 acres of privately owned ranches at risk waiting for funding to be placed into conservation easements.

Nita Vail is passionate about CRT and its mission. And she has good reason. Her family's ranch

on Santa Rosa Island fell prey to a government take over in 1979 when Congress decided her grandfather's island should be part of the Channel Islands National Park. It's a tragic story but with a happy ending...as Courtney White says in his new book, *Revolution on the Range*. White had a chance to sit down with Nita Vail at a conference in Tucson where she shared her story with him. White subsequently included that story in his book, along with an excellent explanation about conservation easements. It's an important story and a good read. I know you'll enjoy it as much as I did. Then, our editor, Bill Reynolds, sat down with Nita Vail to further discuss the work - and dreams and wishes - of the CRT today and what's on the horizon.



photos courtesy California Rangeland Trust





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*The future starts when we begin honoring the dreams of our enemies while staying true to our own.*

—William Kittredge

# Revolution on the Range: The Rise of a New Ranch in the American West

BY COURTNEY WHITE

*Excerpt from Chapter 4 “Out of Cowboy Island” The Former Vail & Vickers Ranch, Santa Rosa Island, California*

Nita Vail’s story, like any good western, is part fairy tale, part tragedy, with a moral and a happy ending to boot. I heard the details when I crossed paths with Nita at a conference at a former ranch turned resort on the outskirts of Tucson, Arizona, where we joined two dozen other citizens from around the region to talk about the “ranching crisis” in the West. That’s what we called it anyway; in reality it was a “sprawl crisis,” because our concern focused on the rapid rate at which former ranch lands were being converted to housing developments.

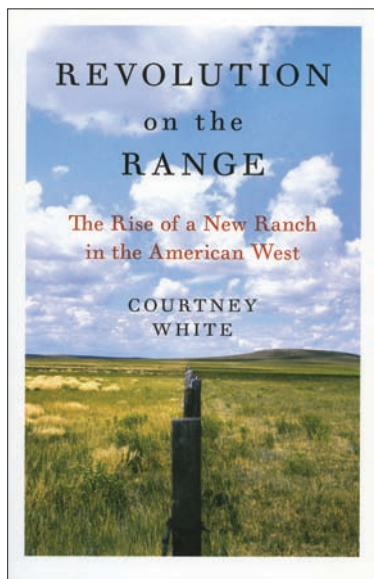
For some in attendance, this crisis meant the loss of ecologically significant open space to suburban and exurban growth. For some, it meant the loss of critical food production capacity, as farms and ranches disappeared under the bulldozer’s blade. For others, it meant the loss of a culturally important lifestyle, as cows were relentlessly replaced by condos. For all, it meant the loss of much of what we loved about the rural West—its land and people.

It isn’t just a western crisis either. According to the nonprofit American Farmland Trust, every minute of every day the nation loses two acres of agricultural land to development. And the rate of loss is speeding up: the

thousand acres of fertile farm and ranch lands were paved over in the 1990s. Nationwide, over the past twenty years the amount of acres per person consumed for new housing has doubled; and since 1994, housing lots of ten acres or more have accounted for 55 percent of all land developed. The deleterious consequences of all this growth extend beyond food production. Farms and ranches provide wildlife habitat, they help protect watersheds, maintain air quality, and provide scenic and recreational opportunities—all lost when we begin pouring concrete and laying asphalt. It is a crisis, in other words, that is felt by all Americans.

My role in the conference was to talk about The Quivira Coalition’s efforts to build bridges between ranchers and conservationists around models of progressive stewardship—models that often provided an economic boost to the landowners. I argued that if a conservation organization wanted to protect the biological integrity of a farm or ranch, it was far cheaper and more effective to help the rancher stay in business than to buy his or her ranch when it was put up for sale.

Nita was there to talk about a different strategy to keep ranchers on



nation lost farm and ranch land 50 percent faster in the 1990s than in the 1980s, with much of the loss taking place on prime agricultural land. For example, in the central valley of California, which annually produces more than \$10 billion worth of food products, almost one hundred



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the land. And because this is the happy ending to her saga, I'll start there.

As the executive director of the California Rangeland Trust (CRT), it is Nita's job to protect as many private ranches as possible using an important tool called a conservation easement, which is a legal mechanism by which a landowner can strip his or her land of its development (subdivision) potential while maintaining control of the property. Often easements are donated or sold to a land trust, which holds them in perpetuity. In the United States, the land trust movement took off in the mid-1970s and today protects more than 5 million acres nationwide from development.

Fair-skinned, blue-eyed, and as composed in appearance as she is in manner, Nita looked more like a successful businesswoman than the daughter of a multigenerational ranching family. I was sure she was equally at ease working her Blackberry wireless as working cattle from horseback. Her career included an MBA in agribusiness from the University of Santa Clara and an appointment by Governor Pete Wilson to serve as the assistant secretary of agriculture and environmental policy in California's Department of Food and Agriculture.

In 2001, she became executive director of the CRT. Of approximately two hundred land trusts in California, the CRT, headquartered in Sacramento, is the only one focused exclusively on ranches and rangeland conservation. Under her energetic and determined direction, ably assisted by a board of directors composed of ranchers, the organization has become one of the largest

land trusts in the state. At the time of our conference it had 173,000 acres under conservation easements statewide, and more than 500,000 acres pending in application—a remarkable achievement for a land trust that had been in existence only since 1998.



Nita Vail

“We were lucky,” she said. “We got our first easement right out of the chute. That gave us credibility and created trust, which was important given the general attitude towards conservation easements at the time.”

That's because until the mid-1990s, easements were almost exclusively a tool employed either by large conservation organizations such as the Nature Conservancy, small, urban-based land trusts, or governmental entities. Ranchers were suspicious of all three for a variety of reasons. Moreover, many ranchers were staunch defenders of their private property rights and distrustful of any organization or agency that

proposed to strip out any part of those rights, even if doing so helped keep the family ranch in business.

The atmosphere changed dramatically in 1993 when the Colorado Cattlemen's Association decided, over some noisy dissent among its members, to form its own land trust. Their idea was simple: create a land trust for ranchers controlled by ranchers. Membership was strictly voluntary. No one was required to sell an easement to the land trust, but if he or she did then they were assured that it would be protected in perpetuity as a working ranch. The idea caught fire. Before long, the success of the Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust inspired their friends in California to give it a try.

“Times were tough,” recalled Nita. “Cattle markets were poor and pressures to develop were building on all sides. Also, generational succession is one of the great challenges facing California's ranchers. We saw what was happening in Colorado and decided it was time to take charge of our own destiny.”

According to Nita, there are multiple financial benefits to easements. The landowner may be entitled to a charitable tax deduction; an easement can lower the taxable value of the land for estate tax purposes; a person inheriting the property may be eligible for estate tax benefits; and a conservation easement may lower property taxes.

All easements do is restrict development rights in perpetuity to agricultural and open space uses (such as recreation), nothing else, she continued. Contrary to what many ranchers believe, easement agreements should not interfere with the



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day-to-day work of the ranch. The property owner still holds title to the land, can limit access, even if the easement was purchased with taxpayer money, and may sell, donate, or transfer the property as he or she sees fit.

Legalities aside, said Nita, the principal value of conservation easements is simple: it keeps families on the land. “Open rangeland is best protected by the ranchers who make their living from it,” she said. “An easement allows the landowner to receive compensation for the open space values his or her property provides but still maintains it as a working landscape.” Easements cost less than purchasing the land outright on the open market at subdivision rates. They’re cheaper to maintain too because the landowner takes care of the property, and the property remains on the county tax rolls. Of all the reasons to do a conservation easement, however, it is the desire to keep the land whole and in agriculture that motivates most ranchers, she said.

“Easements aren’t for everyone,” she cautioned. “Some of the language in the agreements is draconian, so you’ve got to be careful. And some of the criticism of easements is legitimate, but people forget that doing an easement is a property right too.”

Nita pointed out that ranch families own or manage 22 million acres of land in the Golden State. By 2040, it is estimated that the state’s population will swell from its current 32 million to more than 50 million people. That means more pressure to build subdivisions, strip malls, and

freeways on or through private land. It also means more temptation for ranchers and farmers to sell out. And once land becomes fragmented, all the king’s horses and all the king’s men won’t be able to put Humpty Dumpty back together again.



Nita cited two more reasons why protecting California’s ranch lands has ecological benefits: virtually all water consumed in California flows over rangelands at some point; and 95 percent of all threatened and endangered species in California are found to one degree or another on private ranch lands.

Despite these benefits, however, rancher-owned easements remain a contentious issue with some environmental organizations, who liken it to the fox guarding the henhouse. “Our organization is put under a microscope probably more so than organizations that have strictly an environmental purpose,” she said, “when in fact we all want to do the same thing—protect the landscape. We are just trying to do it in a way that also makes economic sense.”

It made sense to me. Still, I knew from bits and pieces of hearsay that there was more to Nita’s story than the success of the California Rangeland Trust. I understood that

she and her family had endured a serious heartbreak with their ranch on Santa Rosa Island, located northwest of Santa Barbara, in southern California. In fact, I suspected that her drive to save ranching in the Golden State was motivated by events on the island during her youth—events, I learned, that lent a melancholy tone to Nita’s fairy tale.

At the conclusion of the day’s proceedings, Nita and I retired to the cool shade of a table awning, sipping drinks as the heat of an early summer day mellowed into a lovely stillness. Once upon a time, the Vail family owned Santa Rosa Island, part of the Channel Islands group.

Nita’s great grandfather, part of a ranching family with roots reaching to southern Arizona, purchased the fifty-four-thousand-acre island in 1901. The rhythms of ranch life remained unchanged until 1979, when Congress created legislation expanding Channel Islands National Park to include Santa Rosa Island. The bill had the support of the Carter administration and was pushed by many environmental groups who said they were concerned about proper protection for rare plants and animals on the island.

The Vail family responded by trying to get their island exempted from the legislation, arguing that their progressive management worked in harmony with nature, and that the “no trespassing” restriction of private property provided solid protection to the whole island. They also insisted that commercial or residential development on the island was not part of their long-range plans. These



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messages fell on deaf ears. The family could not find political allies outside of the ranching community.

“The question that we asked but nobody answered was: protection from what?” Nita told me. “It felt like, from us.”

Nita said a painful irony was at work: although the Vail family’s good stewardship of the island’s natural resources was one of the acknowledged reasons why Congress and environmentalists wanted the island “protected” permanently in the first place, the presence of their cattle was deemed “unnatural” by the same advocates, thereby requiring eventual removal.

“It hurt,” she said, “because it was unfair. We were holistic managers before it had a name.”

Nita noted that her family had few choices. Conservation easements, for instance, were not a practical option at the time. They were also swimming upstream against an environmental movement on a roll since Earth Day. For many activists, there was little or no gray area between preserving a place as a park and “losing it” to agricultural use. For a biologically rich landscape such as Santa Rosa Island, the choice was clear to them. The Vail family struggled against park proponents until 1986, when they gave in to the inevitable and sold the ranch to the federal government, brokering a deal that allowed them to stay on the island, and in business, until 2011.

The story wasn’t over, however.

A few years later, the deal was jeopardized when National Park Service biologists inventoried the ranch and discovered that several

species of plants and animals were in danger of extinction, including the island fox, which eventually wound up on the federal list of endangered species. Park advocates, including biologists with other agencies, began to insist that livestock production



had to be curtailed or ended, pronto. A series of complicated and disheartening—to Nita and her family—maneuvers followed involving various state and federal wildlife agencies as well as (behind the scenes, according to Nita) some key environmental organizations. Pressure began to build to break the deal with the Vails.

When the family continued to insist that a deal was a deal, an environmental organization sued the government to get the cows off, and won. The last cattle drive, memorialized in Gretel Ehrlich’s book *Cowboy Island*, took place in 1998.

Years later, the outcome still rankled Nita.

“The 1916 Organic Act of the National Park Service contains an inherent contradiction which was played out on our island,” she said. “Going back to pre-European landscapes and increasing public access seem incompatible.”

She was referring to the National Park Service’s mission, coded in its

1916 enabling act, to “conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein...by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

“Not enough credit is given today for good stewardship,” she continued. “The Park Service is not holistic. The ecological condition of the island is awful now, but no one talks about the grasses; all they can do is focus on the fox, which is being eaten by eagles.”

In an effort to return the island to a desired “presettlement” condition, the Park Service removed all the feral pigs. With its prey base suddenly gone, the island’s golden eagle population turned its predatory attention to the island fox (apparently the birds hadn’t read the park’s management plan), causing a crisis.

Nita isn’t the only player in this tale that feels her family was treated unfairly. In October 2006, former Channel Islands National Park superintendent Tim Setnicka authored a three-part opinion piece in the *Santa Barbara News-Press* in which he wrote, “To this day, no one has shown that the ranching operation has permanently, significantly or irreparably destroyed park resources.”

He went on to criticize in detail the behavior of federal and state agencies, as well as environmental groups, in their quest to push the Vail family off the island early. “In this process,” he concluded, “the National Park Service has lost much of its credibility in the public eye about how and what it does to carry out its mission. In turn, the environmental community argues that it had to ‘save’



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Santa Rosa Island resources, but the facts are that each year the island's resources were in better and better shape. They didn't need saving from the Vails' activities."

I suspect Nita took little cheer from the former superintendent's words. Still, the whole experience proved to be a motivating lesson for Nita, as she admitted to me. And with the California Rangeland Trust, she found her happy ending.

So, what is the moral to this tale?

For Nita, it was this: "We need to remember where we have come from and go forward in a positive way," she said. "We can't stay stuck in the past."

Our conversation came to an end when Nita excused herself to take a call on her cell phone. I ordered another drink. It was truly a lovely evening, reminding me of how much I missed the Sonoran desert of my youth. I grew up in Scottsdale, a tony suburb of Phoenix, and thinking about the day's events I recalled the proliferation of real estate signs along what was then the desert edge of my hometown. Many of the signs, including one titled "Cowboy Land & Cattle Company," had been defaced by anonymous vandals with a plaintive, spray-painted cry: "SAVE OUR DESERT." I remember asking my father what the message meant, even though I had a good idea.

Of course, the desert wasn't saved. In 1994, while passing through Scottsdale on my way home, I took a

detour and searched for a small, ramshackle horse stable my father had rented called Powderhorn. In my memory, it sat far out in the desert, like a mirage, its only neighbor a funky palm tree nursery. Together,



they formed an odd oasis in a sea of warm sand and creosote bushes. Searching, eventually I found what I was looking for—a generic sign on a generic wall in a generic sea of houses announcing "Powderhorn Estates." Gone to subdivision, every acre.

No one saved my desert. It's not likely that the desert around Tucson can be saved either. Nita may not be able to save ranching in California. The National Park Service may not be able to save the island fox. No one knows what my fellow environmentalists were trying to save when they pushed the Vails off Santa Rosa Island early. I

wondered: can anything be truly "saved" in a world of relentless change? Can any species be fully "protected" in an age that looks to be dominated by global climate change, rising population pressures, and persistent pollution? Should we even try? Or should we try a different approach?

I took another sip of my drink.

The moral of Nita's story was different for me. It warned against the arrogance of certainty in a world characterized by increasing uncertainty. The Vails were punished for what looks like an erroneous belief that their activities were endangering the island's natural bounty. Ignorance and arrogance, in other words, were employed to "save" something that perhaps didn't need "saving."

Is Santa Rosa Island better off today without cattle? I can't say. Would the Vail family have done a better job of managing the island fox than the National Park Service? We'll never know. Does the island's status as a park guarantee that its biological resources will be "unimpaired" for future generations? No one knows. But did it have to be either/or? Park vs. ranch? Saved vs. unsaved? Or could a cooperative arrangement have been created that allowed the Vail family to continue ranching sustainably while government specialists worked to ensure the island's natural bounty? Not at the time. But perhaps things could be different in the future.





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# A Conversation with Nita Vail, Executive Director of the California Rangeland Trust

*LCE: What were your beginnings at the California Rangeland Trust?*

NV: When the California Rangeland Trust (CRT) was started, I was actually working for (CA) Governor Wilson.

I had never been politically active, although I'd been in some leadership roles in the industry. But I was actually in a position – I was Assistant Secretary for Environmental Policy, and I was representing the Department of Food and Agriculture in every area where state or federal regulations impacted agriculture. And at one point I remember sitting on over 55 either committees or task forces or advisory committees and just surrounded by conflicts without solutions. And when the leadership in the California Cattleman's Association that started to form CRT came to me and said would you be interested in serving on our founding board, I realized that this was probably the first opportunity I'd seen in a long time where I could work on something and have some successes.

My interest is really to find solutions, find ways that work, and when you're out there, your work is making a difference. I think one of the biggest things that's changed in the last ten years since the CRT first started, is that it was very controversial inside the Cattlemen's Association. Even today, there are still some cattlemen that are uncomfortable with conservation easements on their property. But I've always believed that the way you create change is you get one or two good examples, and people will get it and follow. So in the very beginning I think the thought was maybe we'd help one or two landowners that preferred a cattlemen's or Ag board versus maybe a more traditional environmental organization like TNC or something like. And what's happened? The floodgates opened on us. And we've actually never gone out to find people to help. They have come to us. That's what makes us very different, and actually creates a little bit of challenge in terms of being very strategic. We never call someone and say – hey, we can help or hey, maybe you should do an easement.

*LCE: So how do you define your Mission?*

NV: Our goal is to keep landowners on the land and we do this by staying true to our mission which is to conserve the open space, habitat and stewardship

provided by California ranches. All our board, including myself, all come from ranching; we all know that this isn't easy. We also know people need to go through a very difficult thought process with generational succession, with their economic situation, with estate planning, so that by the time they come to us, they've made a decision they want to do it. We do not want to influence that decision in any way nor the management of their property. We're basically an organization that's available to hold the easements if, big IF, that is the tool that works for them.

*LCE: Given that, if the landowner asks, can you provide them with the questions or topics they need to ask themselves?*

NV: Yes.

*LCE: So, if someone has just started thinking about trying to retain a ranch holding in their family and they don't know where to start, can they come to you for suggestions?*

NV: Oh, absolutely. What we can do is talk to them about options that we see have worked in similar situations. But we need to know what they want.

*LCE: So was that the scenario for Jack Varian and the V6 ranch?*

NV: Yes, what was interesting is the Trust for Public Land really transacted the easement. They're a national group, they raise money well, and they tend to actually purchase lands and then resell them to state or federal entities. But they started to realize that maybe there are some other approaches. I believe they might have approached Jack, as his motivation is he doesn't ever want to see that ranch broken up, and so his goal is that the kids have to sell the whole ranch. They can't break it up and parcel it off. But what happened is that we were just emerging on the horizon and Jack said, you know, "I want to do this, but I'm just not ready for an environmental group to hold my easement. I want the Rangeland Trust to hold my easement."

*LCE: So that arrangement can be made?*

NV: Absolutely.

*LCE: At that time was that an unusual arrangement?*

NV: It actually happens often, and I will tell you that I think it frustrates some of the environmental interests, but we let the landowner tell us whom they want to hold their easement.





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*LCE: Is this in perpetuity?*

NV: Yes. And the reason it's in perpetuity is because that's the only tax advantage for estate planning that the IRS recognizes. If the IRS was willing to recognize, say, a 30-year easement or something like that, which has its own set of challenges and values, we would look at that, absolutely. But right now there's no estate tax benefit or tax credit benefit unless it's perpetuity.

*LCE: This is expensive and time consuming and right now, you have a backlog, don't you*

NV: A long backlog.

*LCE: The responsibility of the funding, does that fall to you or does that also fall to the landowner?*

NV: The more a landowner advocates for funding beyond what we can do, the higher the chance he has of getting it funded because in California there's over 150 land trusts and they're all competing for the same dollars. In California it's bond money, environmental bonds. So it's very competitive and we work really hard to develop relationships at the agencies, and let me tell you, we're always walking a fine line because we're not going to compromise the principles.

*LCE: Now, because of your track record, are you finding yourself getting along better with the cattlemen's associations?*

NV: We've always gotten along well and we have been closely aligned since the beginning when we were created by the CCA leadership. You're still going to find some very rural counties where people are – “Well, what are these easements about?” “What does this really mean?” We really try to help everyone understand his or her position.

*LCE: Do you find yourself having to make it easier for people to understand? It's all such a huge decision and it is complicated.*

NV: Absolutely. We are working really hard on the message right now to figure out how to make it even simpler because we want to broaden our outreach to the public. Because the more we can be inclusive with the urban population, we're going to raise more money to help more landowners.

*LCE: Is the fact that you're under the radar - because the CRT runs within the agricultural community, probably significantly in the Sacramento area - are you looking to an outreach program that could be a broader loop that you'd swing to get more people to understand the benefits of it?*

NV: Absolutely. And we actually just got a grant very recently from the Packard Foundation. It's a combination - a fund development plan and training with a communications plan. And we just had our initial meeting yesterday to start that. This kind of grant can be very helpful to the CRT. There's a lot of philanthropy in the world today, particularly California. I've heard that 50 percent of the political dollars in this year's national race has come out of California. That's

how much money's here. So by outreaching – nobody really knows who we are except in some smaller agricultural circles, various urbanites gets the fact that if open space is kept in this rangeland, we're going to be able to eat higher quality grass-fed beef and you'll have more habitat as a bonus. That's going to give us more ability to raise money for the long term.

*LCE: Has the Governor's office been open to you?*

NV: Oh, yes, but we're not as active politically. We work really with local, state and federal agencies. We have to know what's going on – example - there's a tax credit that just was reauthorized. This tax incentive will be a significant benefit to some of our landowners and we want to help them reap these benefits. Whatever value of an easement you donate versus getting funded, you get the credit, if you're in agricultural, it's 100 percent write off to the end of year 15. If you're not an agricultural producer, 50 percent. So it's a pretty big deal.

*LCE: Being apolitical - given today's climate of concern about the quality of our food and certainly with the amount of food that the state of California produces and the fact that the CRT is so solution-driven - are you finding anybody that are not agreeing that this is a good thing? This is a no-brainer...*

NV: We've had really good response so far. Yes. What really makes us happy is when U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sends people to us because they trust our credibility. The irony of all this is because we've been under a microscope - originally the agencies and the environmentalists saw us as the fox guarding the henhouse. We've always had to meet higher standards in everything we did from our monitoring to our stewardship - always had to have a much higher level.

*LCE: There must be pressure on you to go to other states, too, with this model.*

NV: There are models like ours in other states too. There's seven other Cattlemen's Land Trusts right now. There's a Web site you can go to, so among the seven of us, we formed a 501(c) 3 called the Partnership of Range Land Trusts ([www.maintaintherange.com](http://www.maintaintherange.com)). Colorado was the first, California followed, then Wyoming, Oregon, Kansas, and Nevada. Montana Land Reliance has also been involved and other states are interested. Each of them are affiliates of their state cattlemen's association. That's a requirement.

*LCE: Is there a size limitation?*

NV: No, but it must be a sustainable operation. The question is how do you define a sustainable operation?

*LCE: So it has to be a for-profit venture, yes?*

NV: Yes, we have an example right now. We have a 500-acre ranch that the owners want to also allow the right to split at some point in the next generation. So is 200, 250 acres sustainable? In this case, yes - potentially for two reasons. One, it has irrigated pasture for haying and, two,



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it's a headquarter ranch that connects to other public land. So there's not an easy answer to that question.

*LCE: So you've got to scrutinize each individual situation?*

NV: Yes, we're trying to stay with our core competency, which is rangeland conservation, helping ranchers stay on the ranches.

*LCE: What is the outreach approach? How do you get the message across to people who haven't been off a pavement for a long time to have sensitivity to this? A lot of kids today feel that food starts in plastic.*

NV: That's what we're working on right now. How do we really develop our core message because not everyone knows what rangeland is? Even our name is under scrutiny. What is a Trust? We're working on the core messaging right now.

*LCE: Are you seeing yourself attracting a broader demographic of supporters?*

NV: Yes.

*LCE: And you could attribute that to the fact that more people are simply becoming aware of you?*

NV: A lot of it's relationship building and our events are pretty eclectic. People want to be part of the West.

*LCE: Are you going to plan on using typical promotion techniques, or is this something you've got to bootstrap and figure out a different way to get the word out?*

NV: We have to be creative. Obviously, we've put together what we hope is a good Web site, but where can we get more media interest? How do we build those stories? Where do we send board members to speak? But on the other side, even without press, the demand has been overwhelming, so we've had to try and catch up and build some capacity with staff and funding.

*LCE: How many people are on staff now?*

NV: We have five full time and three consultants, working on an as needed basis and we actually have a ninth person starting soon for the land transaction side.

*LCE: And the Board?*

NV: We have a hands-on Board, that are all members of the California Cattlemen's Association, who help with the land transactions and monitoring. They're willing to go speak. They're willing to become involved in events. I mean, honestly, we started thinking we'd be kind of a mom and pop nonprofit to help a few people. We didn't know we'd become almost the largest in the state in just ten years, holding over 183,000 acres of easements.

*LCE: So with the political climate - and the economy - of today, is there going to be more pressure to sell these lands or do you think that there is equal pressure to try to keep them as a family holdings?*

NV: All of the above. But we're going to see some hard hits in the livestock industry. The big elephant in the closet is

generational succession and we've heard that 70 percent of the ranches in this country will change ownership in the next ten years.

*LCE: Is there a general mood? Does the CRT see the next generations having an interest to continue?*

NV: I don't know the answer to that. I really pay attention to that personally, as I'm interested in it. I think that the next generation is all getting a better education and getting more skill sets so if they need to, they can keep a job in town and keep agriculture in their life. It depends on what part of the state or country you're in, as well.

*LCE: When one looks at the civilian news, we see more and more issues of food quality - like the recent tomato and pepper incidents, for example. The public feels a growing pressure to maintain the quality of the nation's food source. So it would seem your message is about helping in maintaining the ability for us as a nation to control the quality of our food by helping individual families keep their ranches and farms in production.*

NV: Absolutely. I hope that it's not too late by the time the nation realizes the importance of agriculture. But there're two very - at least in our view - two very different tracks right now in terms of the growth of agriculture. One is either the large mergers like JBS who may soon become the largest meat packer in the world, a Brazilian company, or a lot of the locally grown, grass-fed, organic, natural products where people are selling one head at a time and selling in farmer's markets or selling off of their ranches, and that's a big gap between the two. But both sides are growing. So you're either local or you're international.

*LCE: There seems to be a growing populist view that there's going to be more and more regional or local availability of food, that that's the desire of the purchasing public, that they want to know where their food comes from.*

NV: Yes. I really see it in the Bay Area. I see it in central California - San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara. I don't know how much is directly related to disposable income, but, I see it even in Sierra Valley - folks that sell out of a truck. We see more and more local farmer's markets being more successful every year. But what's interesting about agriculture here in California, is that it has gotten to be so diverse, especially with the wine industry. There is a blend now that adds an element of sophistication along with a growing interest in this locally grown food thing. The public is becoming "foodies" - people very aware of what they eat and where it comes from. That's good. The Ag world is a very interesting community and we want to be there to help it continue to thrive and the best way to do that is to help keep families on their land and keep productive land producing.

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