PRESERVING working Ranches in the SIERRA VALLEY

A Landowner Workshop
Saturday May 16, 1998
Loyalton Elementary School Library
The SIERRA VALLEY

The Sierra Valley, one of the largest alpine valleys in the world, forms the headwaters of the Middle Fork of the Feather River. Lying at an elevation of 5,000 feet, between Yuba Pass on the west and Beckwourth Pass on the east, the valley was settled by English and Irish immigrants in the early 1850's and by Italian-Swiss immigrants after 1860. Many of their descendants continue to live and work in the valley today.

Although some things have changed, life in the Sierra Valley is still tied closely to the seasons and the land retains much of the beauty and richness that attracted its original settlers. In the spring, thousands of ducks, geese, sandhill cranes, and other migratory birds stop in valley marshes on their way to nesting grounds to the north. Ranchers, out in their fields after the long winter, savor those first signs of spring while irrigating their meadows and fixing fences broken by snow.

In summer, the 100,000 acre valley floor transforms itself into a sea of billowing grasses and wildflowers. The air grows thick with cries: cows, calves, meadowlarks, red tail hawks, and coyotes. Ranchers stack fresh cut hay high in giant, historic barns that still retain their usefulness and beauty.

In autumn, golden cottonwood and aspen trees shimmer against the cobalt sky as the migration of birds and cattle resumes. Soon the valley falls silent under its white winter covers. Ranchers clamber into their pickup trucks in the pink light of dawn, delivering hay to their herds as the geese fly overhead without stopping.

Most of the Sierra Valley continues to be owned by ranching families and other landowners who love the land and treasure the life they share in this distinctive mountain community.

SECURING the VALLEY’S FUTURE

On Saturday May 16, 1998, sixty ranchers and other large land owners came together for a day-long workshop to discuss the future of the Sierra Valley. The meeting was organized by a group of Sierra Valley residents, including Jim and Mary Genasci, Attilio Genasci, David and Jane Roberti, Cindy Noble, Pat Ramelli, Bill Copren, Alan Abrams, and Lucy Blake. The Plumas-Sierra Cattlemen’s Association provided lunch and refreshments.
This report outlines the results of the workshop and the actions and priorities that participants are most interested in pursuing.

The Sierra Business Council and the Sonoran Institute offered a framework for the workshop discussions and provided participants with case studies about what other ranching communities around the West are doing to shape the future of their own valleys.

While workshop participants expressed a variety of opinions about current and future challenges facing the Sierra Valley, all agreed that the valley is a unique and special place and that the land and ranching culture needs to be protected. They also agreed that private land owners are well positioned to guide and shape the valley’s future.

VALUES

The workshop began with a discussion of the Sierra Valley’s assets and participants’ reasons for living and working in the valley. Participants were asked what they valued about living in the Sierra Valley. Why did they move or buy land in the valley, or why did they stay in the valley where they were born?

Lifestyle

Participants mentioned the lifestyle, that the valley is a good place to raise children because of good schools and the chance children have to learn through experience. Many equated the rural atmosphere with fewer people, less traffic, and crime. Residents also enjoyed ready access to elected officials, and the sense that one person can make a difference. A community commitment to local institutions such as schools, churches, and the hospital was also cited. Others noted the benefit of an urban center—Reno, Nevada—which is close enough for access to amenities, such as an airport, cultural activities, and other goods and services.
"Sierra Valley is a grand place for a summer's rest while those who delight in fishing and hunting can indulge to their heart's content. Grouse, quail, sagehens, ducks, and English snipe abound to the foothills and meadow lands, while many brooks are full of trout... The people of this beautiful valley -- which in midsummer is one vast green meadow -- are happy, contented, and moderately prosperous, and visitors there are hospitably treated."

The Sacramento Record Union
August, 1891.

People also mentioned the advantages of wide open spaces. Neighbors are not too close, but when they're needed, they are helpful, cooperative, and friendly. It was also noted that the valley is one of the last places where a person can still work outdoors, earning a "clean livelihood." Some participants valued the freedom to do what they want with their own land. Others valued the region's recreational opportunities, including fishing, hunting, hiking, and nearby skiing.

People placed a high value on deep family roots and history in the community, and a prevailing work ethic among ranchers.

Environment

The quality of the environment was also mentioned -- clean air and water, quiet, beauty, being able to see the stars at night, and a better summer climate compared to the heat of the Central Valley. The uniqueness of the valley, as one of the largest alpine valleys in the world, was also named as a benefit. A freshwater marsh, abundant wildlife, and four distinct and beautiful seasons were named as well. Participants also noted the lack of rural subdivisions outside of towns.

Economy

People valued the fact that traditional agriculture is still viable in the valley, with good summer pasture for beef cattle and hay production, and the potential for other agricultural crops.
In the next part of the workshop participants were asked what they wanted the Sierra Valley to be like in twenty years. When asked what they would like to see stay the same, participants wanted to retain the large number of family-owned and operated ranches, and keep them economically viable. The absence of rural subdivisions on the valley floor was also desirable. Most participants wanted to retain large agricultural parcels, have agricultural zoning of uplands for winter feed areas, and keep small rural roads. A diversity of wildlife was desirable. The overall quality of life including the quality of the schools, the valley’s beauty, and the close-knit community were other values people wished to maintain.

When asked what things they would like to see change, participants noted the need to improve the economy, with agriculturally-based, small business development. To that end, it was suggested that cooperative marketing and equipment sharing be investigated; that the agricultural base be diversified (i.e. new crops, livestock, a slaughterhouse); that the number of high-value agricultural products be increased (i.e. niche marketing); that conditions of watersheds be improved; that taxes on agricultural land be reduced; and that the number of prosperous small businesses be increased, so more people in the valley could do business with each other.

In government, people suggested increasing local input into federal and state regulatory controls. Participants saw a need to reduce the number of regulations governing agricultural producers (such as burning and building permits), make the Endangered Species Act more responsive to land owner concerns, and encourage wildlife management by agencies as opposed to popular vote (especially concerning mountain lions).

In terms of lifestyle changes, people wanted to see more cooperation between ranchers to maintain the number of family-owned and operated ranches, thus ensuring that agriculture continues to be economically viable. Participants also cited the need to reach out to other property owners to join this effort to protect ranches and agricultural open space. Participants wanted to see increased economic and cultural activities inside towns (restaurants, libraries, stores, etc.). Also noted was the need to improve communications between agricultural and non-agricultural residents, and to create a regular celebration of Sierra Valley ranching to educate and provide opportunities for information sharing.
In the category of environment, people wanted to increase the public's understanding of managed growth as opposed to rural sprawl. They also wanted a balance of productive agriculture, biodiversity, and small business development. Participants wanted to prevent land use patterns that conflict with working family-operated ranches and farms, increase rewards for good land stewardship, and increase biodiversity. Water was also identified as an important resource in the valley and participants expressed concern about maintaining local control of water resources.

**ACTIONS and PRIORITIES**

In the last section of the workshop, participants were asked: What do we do next and what do we want to learn more about? Those present agreed that they wanted to maintain and enhance the viability of ranching and agriculture in the Sierra Valley. To do this, they wanted to learn more about new techniques to improve the ranching economy including:

- ranch diversification (new crops and livestock, ranch tourism)
- niche marketing (organic beef, Sierra Valley beef)
- a management unit for the Sierra Valley that crosses county lines
- ways to pool local resources (group marketing, a local slaughterhouse, equipment sharing, etc.)

Participants agreed on the importance of ensuring that the valley remains an open landscape with a vibrant ranching economy and a healthy natural environment. To accomplish this, they wanted to learn more about:

- estate planning tools to preserve ranches
- land trusts
- conservation easements
- costs associated with rural subdivisions
- financial incentives for good ranching practices and resource benefits
- impacts of residential growth on the future of agriculture in the Sierra Valley
- town development consistent with the agricultural economy
- transportation planning
Many participants expressed interest in creating some kind of new local organization to help implement a long-term vision for the Sierra Valley and to expand the conversation about protecting working ranches to other members of the community. The organization could be led by ranchers and other valley residents committed to protecting working ranches in the valley. The mission of the organization could be to maintain the open space and cultural heritage of the Sierra Valley. Participants thought a new organization could be responsible for one or more of the following tasks:

- serve as a land trust for the valley
- provide and promote a vision for the valley that crosses county lines
- advise county boards of supervisors about land use issues in the valley
- organize workshops on topics participants want to learn more about
- create better communication mechanisms between ranchers and other Sierra Valley residents (publish a newsletter)
- organize educational tours to visit local ranches in the valley
- educate the public about the positive contribution of ranching to the environment
- establish a well organized cooperative for sharing equipment
- work with the Cattlemen’s Association and the Farm Bureau on issues of common concern

Participants raised some issues that would need to be addressed if a new organization is formed:

- the definition of a “working ranch” should include people who derive a portion of their income from ranching
- the organization should engage non-ranching residents in the valley

NEXT STEPS

At the close of the workshop participants agreed to let the organizing committee write and distribute a summary of the workshop and discuss ideas for follow-up workshops. Participants signed cards indicating their willingness to assist with various tasks and their interest in being kept informed about upcoming events.
"Many tons of excellent hay were cut during the last two years and brought to Downieville -- more than enough to supply the demand. There are now in the valley at present some five or six families who have determined to make it their future home. In addition there are fifteen or twenty "ranches claimed and occupied by men without families."

The Sierra Citizen
April 15, 1854

Workshop Organizing Committee
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With Support From
Sierra Business Council
The Sierra Business Council (SBC) is a nonprofit association of 485 businesses working to secure the long-term economic and environmental health of the Sierra Nevada region for this and future generations. SBC believes that maintaining the working landscape is essential to the long term prosperity of Sierra Nevada communities and works with ranchers and other private land owners to achieve that goal. SBC can be reached at (530) 582-4800.

Sonoran Institute
The Sonoran Institute (SI) is a nonprofit organization that promotes community-based strategies that preserve the ecological integrity of protected lands, and at the same time meet the economic aspirations of adjoining communities and landowners. Sonoran Institute’s Ranching Conservation Program provides information and technical assistance to ranchers interested in preserving working ranches and the natural processes dependent upon these open landscapes. SI’s publication Preserving Working Ranches in the West provides information about private land protection tools for ranchers. SI can be reached at (520) 290-0828.