

Rancher protects rangeland from ‘leapfrog’ development

Melanie Turner, Sacramento Business Journal, 6-11-10

Fourth-generation rancher Nita Vail has worked for more than 10 years to bridge a historically contentious divide between rural landowners and environmentalists in an effort to protect the state’s ranchlands.

For her leadership role, Vail is one of seven Californians honored recently with a 2010 James Irvine Foundation Leadership Award.

Vail, who leads the rancher-governed nonprofit California Rangeland Trust in Sacramento, called the award a “tremendous honor.” The California Rangeland Trust, which Vail and a group of ranchers founded in 1998, has protected more than 200,000 acres.

“I’m passionate about finding solutions because I know we have a lot of common goals in our state,” said Vail, chief executive officer for the trust.

A decade ago, ranchers and environmentalists wanted to do what’s best for the land, but they were doing it in different ways, she said. “There’s been a tremendous shift in that polarization,” she said.

The trust works to permanently protect rangeland through agricultural conservation easements, legally binding agreements. While ranchers were skeptical about such easements early on, that has changed.

More than 100 ranchers have pledged to preserve an additional 500,000 acres through the trust. They’re on a waiting list because of funding constraints.

In the Sacramento region, there are about a dozen pending projects representing between 30,000 and 40,000 acres, she said. Much of Sacramento County was once grazing land. As the state’s population increases, threats still loom. The trust estimates that up to 70 percent of the state’s rangelands could change hands over the next decade.

“There is a huge issue with generational succession,” Vail said.

When ranching is not very lucrative, the first option for ranchers is to divide the land or sell it.

As a result, Vail and the trust are working on a number of policy initiatives, including a collaborative effort to preserve the California Land Conservation Act of 1965, better known as the Williamson Act.

Annual funding for the program was slashed to \$1,000 this fiscal year, from \$33.8 million a year earlier — a first-time cut to the program — and \$38 million in fiscal 2007-08. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger’s May revision for the 2010-11 state budget did not include an increase in funding.

The Williamson Act aims to prevent “leapfrog” development and slow the conversion of ag land to developed uses. Landowners receive a property tax reduction in exchange for restricting their land to ag or open space uses for 10 years.

“Our goal is to keep rangeland conserved in California for a lot of reasons,” Vail said, adding that it’s important for water and air quality, wildlife and a locally grown source of food.

For her efforts, Vail is receiving a \$125,000 award, most of which will be used to support the work of the trust. The awards recognize leaders who've come up with solutions to some of the state's biggest problems.

"I think Nita's work is terrific," said Jim Canales, president and CEO of the James Irvine Foundation.

The organization receives between 250 and 300 nominations a year.

The foundation was impressed with Vail's ability to bridge a divide between rural landowners and environmentalists. In addition, Canales said, the lands have "significant economic and even aesthetic benefits."

Vail is able to bypass the initial mistrust ranchers have toward environmentalists in part because she's a rancher herself. She grew up on a ranch in Santa Barbara County and last year purchased an interest in a ranch in Colusa County.

"She is the heart and soul of California Rangeland Trust," said Scott Stone, a partner in Yolo Land & Cattle Co., a family farming and cattle operation in Yolo and Solano counties. It helps that she's "really good with politicians" and she knows ranching, said Stone, who is also a licensed real estate broker with California Agricultural Properties Inc.

"She can walk the walk, and talk the talk," he said.

The trust worked with the Stone family to place a conservation easement on most of the 7,000-acre cattle ranch. The family runs about 700 head of Angus cattle north of Winters.

The Stone family wanted to ensure the ranch remained forever as a working unit, not split into subdivisions.

"There's a tremendous demand for this program and even more so now that the government is talking about not funding the Williamson Act," he said. "There aren't any other conservation organizations that have that kind of backlog."