Education, Partners Important to California Coalition

Outreach efforts in California aim to inform landowners and the urban public.

By Kindra Gordon

From fruit and vegetable crops to traditional livestock and grain operations, California has a diverse agricultural base. But the state also has a variety of resource concerns, environmental issues and interest groups that impact the ag industry.

Of his state, rancher Chuck Pritchard says, "It's a boon because we can produce a myriad of crops, but because we have so many microclimates here and variations in soils, weather and watersheds, it is a challenge to develop plans to manage agriculture."

To that end, the California Grazing Lands Coalition has worked for over a decade to help bring technical grazing management assistance to landowners, along with working with partner organizations to garner funding for grazing issues and educational efforts.

Pritchard, who has long been involved with the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD), was instrumental in forming the state coalition and has chaired the group since its inception. He says, "I saw the national GLCI effort was fruitful and decided we needed the same in California. I watched the change in emphasis of farm programs to more focus on commodity crops and the loss of range conservationists within land management agencies, and I was a full believer that something needed to be done to bring technical grazing assistance and funding back for private landowners."

He adds, "A large chunk of private real estate in this country is in grazing lands, which contributes to wildlife and habitat, clean air and water, open space and many aspects that are vitally important to the environment."

Pritchard reports that because of the longtime efforts of the California Grazing Lands Coalition and its many efforts they've seen several range conservationist positions added to NRCS and more technical assistance offered to landowners.

Jon Gustafson, NRCS State Rangeland Management Specialist in California, also counts that as one of the coalition's biggest successes.

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“We are facing a large turnover with landowners in California and the coalition has been effective at building bridges to new producers in providing knowledge. The coalition has also brought in non-traditional customers that are not familiar with the type of assistance that is available to them,” says Gustafson, who serves as the NRCS adviser to the California Grazing Lands Coalition.

As an example, he says the coalition has been able to connect landowners with technical experts not only from NRCS, but from the University of California and other land management agency personnel as well.

Educational Efforts

To reach landowners and other interested parties, the California Grazing Lands Coalition has focused on hosting workshops and symposiums, as well as participating in events sponsored by other organizations to get out the message about good grazing land management.

In mid-November, the state coalition along with the California Association of Resource Conservation Districts sponsored the Central California Ag Symposium in Paso Robles. Pritchard reports that this was the tenth workshop the group has hosted, which he believes has been beneficial in grazing land education efforts. This year’s symposium included a series of presentations and educational workshops on rangeland conservation, including well-known speakers Gregg Simonds and Wayne Elmore. A tour of the Sinton Ranch and slide presentation about the Bitterwater Ranch, which Pritchard owns and operates, were also featured, showcasing on-the-ground grazing management strategies.

Gustafson reports the symposium always generates interest and attracts diverse groups of people. This year’s session was particularly targeted to students and sharing environmental management issues with them.

In the future, Pritchard and Gustafson are hopeful the coalition will take more of their message to the general public as well. Pritchard says, “The mistake we, in agriculture, make is that we talk to ourselves very well. We’ve got to take our message to urban populations that have the money and the votes.”

Gustafson adds, “We have a lot of urban areas, and, when you are trying to get people to understand working landscapes and biodiversity, you need to champion good land management.”

To that end, Pritchard says the coalition is already planning a symposium in 2005 to be held in the San Francisco Bay area in an effort to do that.

Pritchard says the coalition in California will also continue to work with private industry and agency partners to develop a unified effort in grazing lands issues.

Local Input

The California Grazing Lands Coalition also hopes to broaden their efforts by developing regional GLCI groups across the state to identify each individual area’s specific resource concerns and solutions. “California is very diverse and issues can really differ from one watershed to the next,” says Pritchard of the localized efforts.

Gustafson also believes that establishing a statewide regional structure will better serve local interests. “Each area has different concerns,” he says and points out these local groups should help continue the outreach to non-traditional customers and the public and help the implementation of management practices across the state for long-term sustainability of private grazing lands.

FORAGE KOCHA OFFERS OPTIONS FOR FALL WINTER GRAZING

Mention kochia and most folks immediately think of a weed, but forage kochia (Kochia prostrata) is a distant relative of the annual weed that actually offers high quality fall and winter forage for livestock and wildlife.

Native to Central Eurasia, forage kochia is a perennial that is well-adapted to marginal rangeland areas, competes with noxious weeds and cheatgrass, and is readily utilized by livestock and wildlife, explains USDA-ARS researcher Blair Waldron, who has studied the plant around the world and often calls forage kochia a “miracle plant” because of its attributes.

Best of all, forage kochia offers about 14% protein content through the fall and early winter and still maintains about 7% by mid-February. Waldron reports that research at Utah State has also shown that having forage kochia in a grazing animal’s diet speeds up digestion and is an economical alternative to alfalfa. One study done by USDA and Utah State showed that even with the cost of establishing forage kochia, it costs about $24.48/head/day to feed compared to about $3/day/head for alfalfa.

Waldron says forage kochia does well in semi-arid areas with 6-12” of annual precipitation and even grows well in alkaline or saline soils. He reports the getting to be more common throughout the West in Utah, Nevada, Idaho, Oregon and Wyoming and eastern Colorado. Forage kochia is not known to be toxic; He suggests producers plant forage kochia in a mix with rangeland grasses, and says successful establishment relies on broadcasting high quality forage kochia seed on disturbed ground. “Burying the seed with a drill will result in a total failure,” he says and adds, “It is a heavy seed producer and will fill in open areas, but generally does not compete with established perennials.”

For more information contact Blair Waldron at the USDA-ARS Forage and Range Research Lab in Logan, Utah at 435-797-3073 or blair.waldron@usu.edu.
Grazing Happenings: Here & There

Wisconsin NRCS and GLCI teamed up to host a unique Grazing Summit in mid-November. Working with the state's Department of Ag, several industry leaders and political decision-makers were invited to the special summit to learn more about GLCI efforts and the importance of proper grazing management to Wisconsin's agriculture economy.

Submitted by Mary Anderson, Wisconsin RC&D

The Michigan GLCI is one of the sponsors for the March 11-12, 2005 Michigan Grazing Conference. This year's theme is "Sustaining Grazing Profitability" and the conference will be at the Comfort Inn Conference Center in Mt. Pleasant, MI.

For more information visit: http://www.msue.msu.edu/fis/index.htm

Frasier Farms in Woodrow and Limon, Colorado hosted a three-site range tour this fall to showcase their implementation of holistic management on their 44,000-acre operation that includes 190 paddocks and 55 miles of water pipeline. Operated by Mark Frasier and his father Marshall, who owns the ranch since 1946, Frasier Farms was recognized by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Award for Environmental Stewardship in 2003.

According to Mark, successful beef cattle production in the high plains of eastern Colorado depends on the interaction of four critical elements. "First, it depends on how well you understand the environment you're working in -- is it brittle or non-brittle? Second, the role of wildlife in your operation -- for instance, how fast are beetles composting organic materials? Or, are animals breaking the crust on the soil to create seedbeds for new growth? Third, the element of time -- how long and what time of year can cattle experience grazing efficiency in one paddock before being rotated? And fourth, holistic grazing management -- the inter-relationship of all of these critical elements in order to successfully balance forage production with cattle production."

Mark emphasized his goals this way: "Holistic management means being flexible planning a grazing system, monitoring plant growth, and being able to modify your plan when necessary. Management cannot be on a set schedule and have specific objectives -- you have to be willing to be flexible."

Submitted by Jeanette Colville, Colorado NRCS Public Affairs Specialist

For a global and holistic perspective on land management, visit the Managing Wholes website which includes insight from Alan Savory. See it at http://managingwholes.com
Hawaii Joins GLCI Effort

On November 17, 2004, the Hawaii GLCI Coalition was officially formed by several partner organizations attending a meeting at the Habein Ranch on the Big Island. NRCS-Hawaii and the Habein Ranch sponsored the meeting and National GLCI Coordinator Kim Stine was in attendance to assist with leadership for the effort.

The meeting was attended by the following organizations: Hawaii Cattlemen’s Council, Hawaii Farm Bureau Federation, Hawaii Cattle Producers’ Cooperative Association, Sheep Producers Association of Hawaii, West Hawaii Wildlife Management Organization, Hawaii Association of Conservation Districts, California-Pacific Section Society for Range Management, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service Agency, University of Hawaii Cooperative Extension Service, and the Hawaii Department of Agriculture. The Hawaii Fresh Milk Industry was unable to have a representative at the event, but has been supportive of the state’s GLCI effort.

Jimmy Greenwell, current President of the Hawaii Cattlemen’s Council, has agreed to be first Chair of the Steering Committee, which will be comprised of the private agricultural and conservation organizations. An Advisory Committee comprised of federal and state agency, and university representatives is also being formed.

Submitted by Joseph May, Hawaii NRCS Range Management Specialist/State GLCI Coordinator.

For more information, contact him at joem@hawaii.gov

Watch the March GLCI News for more about grazing issues and efforts in Hawaii.

THE CHAIR’S CORNER

Bob Drake
Chairman
National GLCI Steering Committee

With winter upon us, GLCI is gearing up to be represented at several industry trade shows and annual meetings. The National GLCI Steering Committee will also hold its annual spring meeting March 14, 2005 in Washington, DC. These events are all an important opportunity to take the GLCI message to our country’s leadership and political decision-makers to continue to garner awareness and support for important grazing issues. We are continuing to work to fill the six regional GLCI positions that were advertised this fall and hope to have them filled and running in the New Year.

Bob Drake, Chairman
National GLCI Steering Committee

Visit the GLCI homepage at http://www.glci.org

To have your GLCI activities or upcoming events highlighted in this newsletter, contact Kindra Gordon at phone 605-722-7699 or kindra@gordonresources.com