

Stewardship Leaders in Agriculture

Conservation Easements

Hafenfeld Ranch

For the past 39 years Mr. Hafenfeld and his family have been in charge of a ranching operation outside of Weldon, CA that has been in existence for over a century. The cattle operation is run on a combination of private land, U.S. Forest Service permits, Bureau of Land Management land, and an Audubon California preserve.

Land Conservation

The Hafenfeld Ranch was slated to be designated as critical habitat for the endangered Southwestern Willow Flycatcher under an eminent domain lawsuit, but Mr. Hafenfeld was able to save the ranch with the creation of two conservation easements that demonstrate how the managed ranch is able to provide protection to flycatcher habitat. The Hafenfeld's now time some of their cattle grazing to protect the mixed understory of the riparian habitat that breeding flycatchers prefer. A Wetland Reserve Program under the Natural Resources Conservation Service is in place that includes habitat enhancement of old growth riparian vegetation further supporting the endangered flycatcher. Mr. Hafenfeld participated in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) program, "Walk a Mile in My Boots," a work-exchange developmental program between cattle ranchers and the USFWS aimed at giving all involved an "inside" look at each other's lifestyle. Furthermore, Mr. Hafenfeld annually grazes cattle on the Audubon Kern River Preserve as part of a management program that prevents a build of thatch and supports a mixed understory that supports not only the endangered flycatcher, but a wide variety of species found in the Kern River Valley.

"Our family has been providing prime habitat for flycatchers along the streams and irrigation ditches that have been part of our normal ranching activities for decades." – Bruce Hafenfeld



Photo courtesy of California Cattlemen's Association

ACHIEVEMENTS

- Creation of two conservation easements that protect the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher
- Participates in the Wetland Reserve program further protecting the ranch's riparian habitat
- Entered into unprecedented partnerships with federal, local, and environmental groups
- Formed framework for fellow ranchers and agencies to work together to meet each other's diverse needs



Photo courtesy of California Cattlemen's Association



Photo courtesy of California Cattlemen's Association



Photo courtesy of California Rangeland Trust

“We developed a management plan along the Kern River Preserve, went after a wetland reserve grant, and developed habitat that increased opportunities for species to come onto my land. We were trying to show that we were not a liability, but an asset.”
- Bruce Hafenfeld

PROJECT PARTNERS

California Audubon Society

California Rangeland Conservation Coalition

California Rangeland Trust

Kern River Preserve

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

California Rangeland Trust: Conservation Easements

The California Rangeland Trust (CRT) helps to establish conservation easements that are voluntary agreements between private land owners and qualified land trust, conservation group or government agencies that protect the land's agricultural, scenic, historical and wildlife values. The CRT monitors the one of the two conservation easement agreements that Hafenfeld Ranch entered into in terms of protecting the riparian habitat while still allowing for continued ranching.

Natural Resource Conservation Service

The United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service's (NRCS) Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) provides up to 50% of fair market easement value for conservation easements. In partnership with existing state, tribal, or local government organizations the FRPP provides matching funds to keep productive farm and ranchland in agricultural use. The NRCS's Wetland Reserve Program is a voluntary program that seeks to achieve the greatest wetland functions and values, while providing optimum wildlife habitat. Mr. Hafenfeld used both of these programs while creating his ranches conservation easements.

PROJECT DETAILS

Working Ranches and Conservation

Hafenfeld Ranch is located a few miles from the Lake Isabella Reservoir. The reservoir was created to provide flood control and water storage to farms and communities in the Central Valley, but it had unforeseen consequences for nearby land owners. The Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, a bird listed under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA), moved into the new riparian habitat that was quickly designated as a wildlife preserve. Subsequent management by the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers (Corps) flooded flycatcher habitat and a flycatcher nest. In order to protect the birds, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) required the Corps, under an ESA Biological Opinion, to acquire 1,120 acres of riparian habitat.

This effort endangered the Hafenfeld Ranch and other nearby ranches as they faced increased regulation and potential conversion to mitigation habitat with the USFWS designation of ESA critical habitat. Through countless meetings and thanks to a fortuitous visit by a USFWS biologist sent by then USFWS regional manager Steve Thompson, Mr. Hafenfeld was able to demonstrate how his ranch was already supporting the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher. Close to three miles of ditches carry water from the South Fork of the Kern River to the ranch where it is used for irrigation. During transport, 60% of the water is absorbed by willows that line the banks creating a contiguous riparian habitat. Mr. Hafenfeld has sustained this prime flycatcher breeding area for years and his hard work paid off when, after seeing how ranches can and already were supporting habitat for the flycatcher in the Kern River Valley, the Biological Opinion was changed to allow for conservation easements as an alternative to outright acquisition.

After eight years of hard work, Hafenfeld Ranch now has two conservation easements on its property, one through the Natural Resources Conservation Service's (NRCS) Farm and Ranchland Protection Program and the other through the NRCS's Wetlands Reserve Program with one easement recorded by the California Rangeland Trust. Hafenfeld Ranch has guaranteed its future operations while also ensuring that the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher habitat will be protected in perpetuity.

A New Vision of Ranching and Conservation

Mr. Hafenfeld's conservation easement process was lengthy and challenging, but it was supported by a number of conservation organizations and made unprecedented partnerships with federal agencies. He sought funding through unconventional methods and showed that ranching conservation easements can be a successful mitigation method that protects endangered species and ranchers simultaneously.