



## POINTEDLY POSITIVE: INTRODUCING A RANCHING SUSTAINABILITY SELF-ASSESSMENT SYSTEM

*Jim Zingo, UCCE*

To foster ranching sustainability, a committee of ranchers and other professionals has met over the past year to develop and eventually implement a voluntary self-assessment system for the ranching community. This has been supported in part by the San Luis Obispo County Oak Woodland Stewardship Program through its Working Among the Oaks component to promote oak woodland

### MISSION STATEMENT

TO CREATE AND IMPLEMENT A VOLUNTARY SELF-ASSESSMENT PROGRAM IN WHICH WE EVALUATE ALL ASPECTS OF OUR OPERATIONS TO ENSURE THE SUSTAINABILITY OF OUR PRODUCTION, OUR LANDS, AND OUR FAMILIES; TO DETERMINE WHAT WE DO WELL AND FIND WAYS IN WHICH WE CAN IMPROVE, IN ORDER TO ASSURE OURSELVES AND THE PUBLIC OF OUR STEWARDSHIP OF OUR ANIMALS AND THE NATURAL RESOURCES.

conservation through good rangeland stewardship. Incorporating input solicited from other ranchers as well as outside parties, the system is being modeled after the Central Coast Vineyard Team's Positive Points System, which has been successful as a way for grape growers to voluntarily assess the sustainability of their operations. This is done by a self-evaluation process in which the producer asks a series of questions about the social, economic, and natural resource management practices he or she is using. The "positive points" approach is designed to give credit where it is due, to provide positive reinforcement of effective or otherwise successful practices, and to encourage participation, progress, and innovation. The ranching project was introduced to the public on May 8th at the "Ranching for Wildlife: *Get in the Game*" workshop held at the Work Ranch (see the cover article in this issue).

### THE SUSTAINABILITY EQUATION

*sustainable* = economically viable + ecologically sound + socially responsible

Chaired by San Miguel rancher George Work, the "positive points" committee is comprised of Central Coast ranchers Cliff Garrison, Aaron Lazanoff, Kevin Kester, Steve Sinton, Jack Varian, and Chuck Pritchard, and natural resource professionals Bill Tietje and Jim Zingo (UC Cooperative Extension). The heart of the project is ranchers helping themselves and each other using a proactive approach to help maintain the autonomy of their lifestyle and also their role within the larger community. Successful range managers achieve sustainability through recognition of system processes, effective practices, and innovative solutions.

At the recent workshop, George Work led participants through a series of questions designed to assess the land manager's effectiveness at managing biodiversity on his or her property. The conservation of biological diversity is primarily an aspect of the ecological soundness part of the sustainability equation (see below left), but it also pays dividends in the economic arena and the human community at large. Traditionally one might think solely of game management and hunting on ranches, but good rangeland stewards know that their efforts provide for much more than that. While perhaps the most charismatic component of rangeland diversity is its vertebrate wildlife, well tended oak rangelands support a high level of biodiversity with abundant and diverse communities of plants, vertebrates, invertebrates, and microorganisms.

### ASSESSMENT CATEGORIES

LIVESTOCK MANAGEMENT, SOIL MANAGEMENT, FORAGE MANAGEMENT, BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION, REGULATIONS AND REGULATORS, PEOPLE MANAGEMENT, ECONOMICS, ENERGY, MONITORING, PEST MANAGEMENT, AND WATER QUALITY.

Development of the Ranching Sustainability Self-Assessment System continues and likely will evolve over time to meet the needs of the ranching community and reflect our increasing understanding of rangeland sustainability and good stewardship practices. Primarily a volunteer effort to date, full implementation will need funding and other support. Future efforts may involve a website including an interactive "model ranch" and a central hub of communications and information, the ongoing compilation of educational materials on rangeland practices, and a confidential database to serve the ranching community utilizing this resource.

*Most content for this article was drawn from fact sheets and draft materials developed by the aforementioned committee of Central Coast ranchers and natural resource professionals.*

