

The Central Coast Rangeland Coalition: Rangeland Health Indicators Project

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Larry presented progress on an important new program called the Central Coast Rangeland Coalition: Rangeland Health Indicators Project. The goal of the project is to develop a practical and critical rangeland health indicator system for the California Central Coast region. Three project areas have been established within the region; one in the East Bay of San Francisco, one in Monterey Bay, and one at Morro Bay, the areas extend inland to the inner coast ranges. The main purpose of the Central Coast Rangeland Coalition (CCRC) is to foster a cooperative experimental approach to develop indicators that aid in sustaining biological diversity and the natural resources of rangelands. The CCRC also intends to catalyze general awareness of rangeland stewardship, and to enhance the knowledge and economic viability of rangeland stewards; primarily ranchers and public agency rangeland managers. Implicit in these purposes is the improvement of planning and monitoring for rangelands. The CCRC expects to develop a standard for rangeland health monitoring in the region, which for the most part is not presently occurring.

The CCRC is different from the California Grazing Lands Coalition, although related. The first meeting of the CCRC was held in San Luis Obispo in January of 2002, where the need for a tool to assess healthy rangelands that is accepted by ranchers, agencies, and scientists was recognized. Subsequent meetings have focused on the divisions over grazing primarily between scientists and managers, threats to watersheds and wildlife, and the decline of rural communities and infrastructure associated with livestock grazing. The core leadership of the coalition consists of ranchers, as well as agency managers and scientists. The Natural Resource Conservation Service supported a Cooperative Agreement to develop the indicator system. Since the initiation of the project last fall three meetings of ranchers and two meetings of agency rangeland managers have been held. Following the meetings summaries of priority concerns and indicator concepts were compiled.

The first phase of the project aims to determine the existing and desired rangeland health conditions and the highest priority indicators in the region. The coalition is reviewing the outcomes of the meetings at major points in the process to refine and approve the system, and to incorporate advice from scientists. The indicators will then be refined based on appropriate criteria and monitoring protocols will be incorporated.

At the time of Larry's presentation the CCRC had conducted the rancher and agency manager meetings. Next the CCRC plans to have its general meeting in October, followed by convening a science review panel, and finally another general meeting to complete the first phase of the project. Subsequently, phase two will be initiated to test the newly developed system.

Three indicator categories were teased out from National Research Council and Natural Resource Conservation Service publications. These conventional categories pertained to: the

degree of soil stability and watershed function, the integrity of nutrient cycles and energy flows, and the presence of functioning recovery mechanisms. The CCRC wanted only the most important indicators and concerns to be included in their framework. Two more indicator categories resulted from the CCRC meetings: the maintenance of rare endangered species, species richness, and habitat quality, as well as socio-economic values and planning.

The need for rangeland health indicators is clear and stems from the vocal demand for management that results in rangeland health and sustainability. The California Rangeland Resolution demonstrates the critical importance of California's privately owned rangelands for conservation. Furthermore, rangeland management planning will be improved with an understandable and credible system of indicators to guide management, such as those being developed by the CCRC. An indicator system that is practical to apply will also allow monitoring to be more efficient and relevant. Presently rangelands are not usually monitored or are monitored insufficiently to determine rangeland health in spite of all the guidelines available. Oftentimes, these guidelines are too complex or tedious to implement, and are therefore not practical.

Preliminary results from the meetings have demonstrated that ranchers and agency managers share common concerns that "one-size-fits-all" management doesn't work. Each site is unique and the challenge of differing environmental characteristics and landowner goals must be addressed. Ranchers and agency managers want the CCRC indicators to help them demonstrate and evaluate good management, while meeting their own goals for rangeland health and special resources. A primary interest of the ranchers was the desire to be recognized for environmental benefits to the landscape, and not just criticized for past harm. Public rangeland managers want recognition of the limitations and opportunities of the policy mandates of their agencies. Among forty-six high priority indicator concepts voiced by ranchers five were considered to be most important at all three meetings of ranchers. The five most important indicators cited by ranchers were: ground cover trend after drought, storms, and livestock grazing and autumn residue, soil retention, thatch, diversity in structure and habitat, and special resource conservation, such as rare plants and animals and the reduction of invasive species. Among twenty-eight priority indicator concepts cited by agency managers, five were considered to be the most important at both meetings. The five indicator categories were: water quality (TMDLs, aquatic fauna), soil productivity, control of noxious and undesirable plants, structural and habitat diversity, and special resource conservation of rare plants and animals. It is interesting and important to note that three out of the top five priority indicator concepts were shared between ranchers and agency managers.

In conclusion the CCRC indicators project recognizes that both science and practical indigenous (local managers') knowledge are necessary to reach a consensus on a credible and practical indicator system. Adequate planning, including record keeping, monitoring, analysis of results, adaptation, and peer review, is essential and must be adaptable to different goals and settings. The CCRC hopes that its indicator system will be a model that is widely accepted and attracts others to follow and offer improvements.