

CONSERVATION PROFILES

“You can say you love the land but remember love is not a feeling, it’s a decision, whether it’s the land or your spouse, love is a decision and it requires work and you have to know what that land or that person needs.”

George Work



George and Elaine Work (center). On horseback are Mattie, Johanna, Ben and Kelly.

California

A Labor of Love—A Work of Progress

Grass grows best when a cow is not standing on it, said George Work’s father, the second generation tender of this central coast ranch. Thus, the “contemporary” practice of rotational grazing came early to the Work Ranch. George and Elaine have not let that innovative tradition slow down an iota. George was among the first ranchers in the Nation to adopt holistic management. And as a result, even the family runs differently with weekly meetings to discuss issues and concur on goals and strategies.

George has worked with agencies and universities to balance the ranch’s resources with its 200 cow/calf herd and to reestablish perennial grasses. As a result the ranch provides most of its own feed for year-round self-sufficiency. Grazing innovations run deep on this central coast ranch.

The last few years George and Elaine Work have spent a lot of time helping start three groups: Ag Tourism; Buy Fresh, Buy Local; and Central Coast Home Grown Meat Alliance. Meanwhile, their son Ben, the fourth generation rancher, is operating both the dryland farming and cattle production on the ranch. Ben’s wife Kelly, mother of Mattie, Johanna and Dawson, guides trail rides on the ranch and hosts horse camps.

Even the cattle have jobs. They control weeds, repair minor erosion cuts, and help manage decadent chaparral in a process the Works call the Brush Crush. Lured into the wooded area with alfalfa hay, cattle clear overgrown shrubs without fire or bulldozers.

For more information:
www.nrcs.usda.gov
www.beef.org

Since 1981, the Work Ranch has been involved with the California Department of Fish and Game's Private Lands Wildlife Habitat Enhancement and Management Program. This program works to improve habitat for all species.

Many wildlife species share the ranch with the livestock, including wild pigs, tule elk, black tail deer, coyotes, mountain lions, rabbits, quail, owls, hawks and eagles. George has made this cohabitation easier by conceiving and building his own ground-level wildlife watering troughs. The NRCS Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program helped fund the project and the Upper Salinas-Las Tablas Resource Conservation District is now

drafting and distributing copies of the plans for other ranchers interested in enhancing habitat.

The diversified Work Ranch is one the public can visit—through guided hunts, trail rides, environmental restoration field days, tours, or guest lodging. The Works discovered the idea of hosting farm stays while in New Zealand. When they returned home, however, they discovered that state law didn't allow it. George worked with the California Alliance of Family Farmers to change the law. Now visitors are welcome to dine, lodge and explore five generations of ranching innovation at the Work Ranch.

WORK RANCH CONSERVATION AT A GLANCE

Key Practices:

- Rotational grazing
- Fencing
- Windmill pumps
- Wildlife-friendly ground-level watering troughs
- Unharvested crops for wildlife
- Brush management with cattle
- Perennial grass establishment
- Homestays and trail ride programs

Programs Used:

- NRCS/RCD Technical Assistance
- Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)
- Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)
- University of California Cooperative Extension, Davis
- Private Lands Wildlife Habitat Enhancement and Management Program

George Work has created his own equal access watering trough (top left) for both livestock and wildlife. Cattle on the ranch work for their lunch, leveling overgrown chaparral in exchange for alfalfa hay (left center). Johanna (bottom left) and her Mom Kelly (shown with Johanna bottom right), operate a successful trail ride program to show the ranch and provide diversified income.

