

## Challenging conditions force ranchers away

Mike White, STAFF WRITER

Cattle ranching may be one of the East Bay's oldest industries, but keeping history alive is not always easy for the families that have run grazing operations for more than 140 years.

As cities have paved over huge chunks of open land, an increasing number of ranchers have moved their operations to less expensive land in other regions of Northern California. For instance, operators of the Nielsen Ranch in Dublin have acquired two ranches outside the area, totalling 16,000 acres, one near Chico and the other near the Oregon border.

The family maintains about 600 acres in the west Dublin hills, but most of the family's properties in the Dublin area have been converted to new subdivisions. Family members would like to sell the Dublin hills property, too, and buy less expensive land in more agriculturally friendly areas, but zoning regulations prevent developing the Dublin land.

At the same time, neighbors in the new nearby homes are fighting the family's plans to build corrals and bring in additional cattle.

"It's been a challenge dealing with the new neighbors," said Roxanne Nielsen, a fourth-generation rancher who helps run the operation with her brothers, Robert Jr. and Jeff. "Urban people just don't understand agriculture."

As ranching on privately owned land becomes less common, more and more grazing in California takes place on land leased from the government. The Niensens, for instance, lease 10,000 acres in Sunol from San Francisco's water department.

At least 17 cities and other public agencies in Alameda and Contra Costa counties lease land for grazing, said Sheila Barry, a livestock adviser and resource specialist with the University of California Cooperative Extension.

"The mix of public and private grazing land is rather important to maintaining large areas of open space," Barry said. "It also provides some important ecosystem functions."

The idea that ranching provides habitat for endangered species gives the industry a modern flavor. But to watch daily life unfold on these wide open lands is to step back in time.

Eagles and coyotes abound on Darrel Sweet's ranch land in the Altamont hills, much as they have for the five generations his family has lived there. Cattle mill about in small groups, munching on grass until the land is nearly barren and they are moved to another pasture, each separated by fences that tilt with age.

There are modern touches as well. Instead of water, the cattle sometimes lap up liquid molasses, which supplements their diet of dry grasses. The modern sounds from windmill gener-

ators and the swooshing of the fiberglass blades fill the air.

The hillsides look much different than they did when Spanish missionaries introduced cattle grazing into the state in the early 1700s.

During those early days in California, Ohlone Indians based out of Mission San Jose, in present-day Fremont, roamed on horseback or on foot with the mission's cattle from the south-

ern end of the Livermore Valley to present-day Danville.

Grazing required vast amounts of land, so when people started coming to the state in greater numbers in the 1850s after the Gold Rush, they focused on dry farming.

"You could farm 160 acres and raise a family, but you couldn't make enough from grazing on that amount of land," said Gary Drummond, a local historian.

While agriculture flourished on the valley floor, families by the 1870s were making a good living grazing sheep in the Altamont hills.

"The practice of grazing sheep is why the Altamont looks the way it does today," Drummond said. "The cows only ate the grass, but the sheep took out the roots. That area has never recovered."

Dry weather also made it difficult for early Californians to make a living on grazing. In 1864, for instance, the region had little rain, and horses and sheep in Livermore and around the state perished because they didn't have enough grass to feed on, according to research by the Livermore Heritage Guild.

Weather continues to play havoc with ranchers' livelihoods. During a year with good rain, Dan Sachau can run 80 head of cattle on 800 acres in south Livermore. During dry conditions, he can't have more than 40 head on the same acreage.

But despite the hardships, ranchers say the industry is cyclical and they have learned to weather the ups and downs as best they can. Many have no intention of leaving the business.

"It's not just a job," said Dubin's Nielsen. "It is your heritage."

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