



# Ranching



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## The 21st Century Cattle Rancher

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The Altamont Pass, east of Livermore and west of Tracy, California, has not changed too much since Darrel Sweet's great-great-great-grandfather, Richard Young, farmed here. Its hills blaze golden under an uncluttered blue sky much of the year, especially in dry years like these last two have been. The fields of alfalfa and hay have been replaced by fields of cattle rangeland, interspersed with fields of windmills. Darrel Sweet now lives in a house, with his wife Karen, just up the hill from where the house that Young built still stands. Sweet grew up in the town of Livermore, but he came back to the ranch.

Some of the family land was sold a generation ago, but Darrel bought it back. He runs a cow-calf and stocker operation on about 900 acres. Unlike many ranchers, he owns all the land his cattle graze.

A lot of things are done here in a classic fashion. The brown-and-white splotched paint horse is called just the paint horse; the dog, who is built like a sheep, is called Dude; the cats, like the cows, have no names. But you can't keep a working ranch working just by being old-fashioned and a reactionary. It takes old-fashioned effort, yes—but also sharp business acumen, creative financing, and a progressive outlook.

But first, the old-fashioned parts of ranching, which begin with the horse itself. The flairs on the saddle, the tassel on the bridle, and the spurs Sweet wears are the style worn by the Spaniards who first brought horses to the New World. The first rancher-cowboys in the New World had to do all the same work he does.

Some of that doesn't seem much like work. The big ruminants take care of themselves on a daily basis. They eat grass, roam, sleep, and give birth in the hills. Sweet, just like those early vaqueros, does the rounds to keep an eye on his herd. Trouble would be, say, a fence-break, a sick animal, or a coyote encounter. But he isn't just riding easy all day. As the species hasn't learned any manners since the time of the Spaniards, the animals still have to be pushed around—herded when possible, roped when necessary—if you want them to do anything other than stand, graze, or moo. "Most ranchers are in their own right damn fine cowboys," as one rancher put it. Other ranching methods haven't changed much either in generations. While dairymen's nutritionists know exactly how X much of such-and-such alfalfa equals Y amount of milk, ranching is still much more low-tech: the basic premise is cows graze the land and get fat. In the corrals, ranchers still brand cows with hot irons to identify them, castrate males, and thrust their arms into the cavity of a cow to assess whether she is pregnant or barren.

Aside from the nitty-gritty tasks of ranching life, cattle-men like Sweet have two

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basic concerns, both of which are timeless and inherent to the job. One is the weather. All ranchers have an eye on the sky at all times. The other is the cost of doing business. And California is a particularly expensive place to raise cattle.

On a recent visit to the Sweet ranch, it's a bright, gray morning in mid-winter. The hills are tinged green from the recent rain. This makes Sweet's ranch less costly to run, as well as saving him time. He has to supplement the cows' diet with more or less hay depending on how much rain has fallen. He has to drive the hay out to different parts of the ranch, because if he just dumps it all at the fence, the cows will collect there all day long, mooing and waiting for some-one to feed them.

Besides his time and the effort, hay is expensive. In the 1980s, you could fatten a cow for 75 cents to 90 cents a pound and sell it for more than a dollar a pound. No longer. The 2006 average price per pound for calves in California was 87 cents, which is right around the break-even price for most ranchers. High-quality hay has nearly doubled in price in the last year. And as fuel prices rise, so does the cost of transporting cattle anywhere. That shrinks the market of buyers.



Sweet has a deal to sell all his cows directly to the Harris Feeding Company feedlot. He's under less pressure to sell at just the right time than ranchers who sell at auction. Contracts like his are now more common in the state than ever, and economists say the lack of buyer competition keeps calf prices low. But the choices are few. California doesn't produce all the grain its cattle need. Feedlots in places like Nebraska, where corn is abundant, are cheaper to operate. Slaughterhouses, too, are more profitable near feedlots because fat cows are expensive to ship. So many feedlots and slaughterhouses in California have closed over the years. Now two-thirds of the cattle leave the state to die. Of the rest, a third go, like Sweet's cattle, to Harris Feeding Company. With 120,000 head at any time, it is the biggest feedlot west of the Rockies—if you've ever driven down Interstate 5 through the central San Joaquin Valley, you've smelled it.

Aside from minor catastrophes, and counting on the continuing resourcefulness of marrow marketers, beef prices follow as neat a supply-demand sine wave as you'll ever see. "The cattle cycle," as economists call it, goes up and down about every 10-12 years. They were very bad in the mid-1990s; they have stayed up a little longer in the latest cycle. Profit, however, has gone steadily down as the cost of doing business goes steadily up.

Yet ranchers stay in as long as they can, according to Max Olvera, co-owner of the Turlock Livestock Auction Yard, who sells cows for Darrel Sweet's fellow ranchers in the Central Valley.

"I haven't seen anybody throw the towel in because they're not making a living," he says. "What it's come down to is the availability of pastures around the country, resources to run the cattle. Leases are up; we've seen people that have had pastures for years and all of a sudden they get notice from the landlords that they're going to take the cattle out and put almonds in." Even when that happens, the jig isn't quite up—a rancher can still get rid of some cattle, or find new grazing leases on public or private land. A few economic studies have found that ranchers tend to continue ranching and keep their land well past the point that the economics make sense—if they love what they do. More often than going broke, ranchers close or sell out when the kids go for some other career.

In urban areas like Contra Costa and Alameda counties, not many ranchers make their entire income from ranching. Darrel Sweet consults on ag credit and land trust deals. Karen Sweet has an office job for the Alameda County Resource Conservation District. "You won't make any money but the clean living," as one rancher said. Because there's nothing like living in open space, even if you have to put up with windmills in the view. The fresh air above the city smog, the golden hills with their salamanders and squirrels, the peace.

In the city, many of us cannot afford to buy any land at all. We rent and move and rent someplace else. We may land someplace because the weather suits us, or we went to school there, or the market is good for our profession there; we move for the same reasons. Most places in the city, we are not supposed to make too much noise, park on the front lawn, build a shed that's too tall, or have too many cats. But imagine having so much land that you can see your neighbors' houses only by going to the top of the nearest hill. Imagine that you can map every squirrel hole on it, and that you knew the grandparents of the coyotes that currently roam it. The Sweets' roots here are deep like the oak trees'. That is why they have begun to call themselves conservationists.

Darrel's grandchildren, Audrey and Blake, are the seventh generation of the family to ride horses over this land. Audrey, not yet three, already wants to take the reins away from Grandpa when he takes her out. She has seen tree frogs, red-legged frogs, and California tiger salamanders, which are the three endangered species living on the property. The frogs appear in bathtub water troughs that dot the hills. The CTS (as biologists and biologist-educated ranchers call them) hang out in the brown, unceremonious pond that Sweet dug for his cattle.

Keeping this land as rangeland has become more difficult. When Karen and Darrel Sweet were young children, Livermore had about 4,400 people. The town

quadrupled in less than a decade with the birth of two national laboratories, Sandia and Lawrence Livermore. Scientists and their families arrived to fight the Cold War with physics—city people, that is, with city priorities and perspectives. At the last census estimate, Livermore was up to 80,000 and still growing. The land has long been worth more for development than for production. Ranching is a land-rich and cash-poor kind of business.

It used to be that the land was a rancher's savings account. When the family was facing hard times or a marriage or some other expenses, they could carve off a little corner of the land and sell it to some other rancher or farmer. Land is still equity now, but zoning laws have raised the stakes: the Sweets' land can only be sold in at least 160-acre parcels. The rule is designed to protect the land from getting carved up into sub-divisions. Nationwide, exurban development—small, non-agricultural residences in rural areas—is the fastest growing land use, and people worry the trend will 'parcelize' ranches out of existence. But now, if the cattle business went south or a developer were to take an interest in the land, the Sweets would have an all or nothing choice.

The Sweets are working on a deal right now that will keep at least some of their grass in its wide swaths forever. This winter they have been working on turning 97 acres into a mitigation easement for Caltrans. The highway agency has to create five acres of wetland for every one that it destroys while building up Interstate 5. Part of that could be done on the Sweets' property, which is kit fox and salamander country. A mitigation might bring them as much as 90 percent of the land's total value. They don't say how much that is, but they do say that the 100 acres next door sold for \$9,000 an acre.

Selling the development rights to protect land is an old idea. President Franklin D. Roosevelt set money aside for land trusts some hundred years ago. In the simplest conservation easement, a conservation group buys development rights—the rancher gets a lump sum, which is roughly the difference between what the land would be worth to sell to a developer and what it would be worth undeveloped.

But really, you can't just protect the land once and forever and let it fallow. That is why conservation groups don't just buy the ranch from the rancher, and why modern easements have changed in design. And many of the endangered species that everyone is interested in saving in California have come to depend on cattle.

"Science says the way I keep my ranch keeps the habitat healthy," says Sweet. "Being good old free-market ranchers."

That is, some new studies have shown that native annual grasses have more room to grow once the cattle eat the invasive perennials. Or that tiger salamanders have an easier time going from a birth pond to a mating pond if the grasses are kept tidy by cows. Message-savvy ranchers say that ranching is not only their personal business, but also a public service of maintaining the open spaces. For years, that public service has been done for free. So conservation easements have developed that would pay ranchers a yearly sum to keep the land properly grazed.

As you would expect, there is not a huge amount of money set aside for these kinds of conservation deals. The Land Trust Alliance says it is an expensive business. The Sweets would like to see more. So aside from preserving their own property, they have become activists for cattlemen all over California. Karen Sweet works for the Alameda County Resource Conservation District. Among other things, it helps ranchers get more money to restore the ponds that endangered critters like. The Sweets have lobbied in Washington to conserve rangeland. Darrel, with his ag finance background, helps ranchers put the deals together properly. The Sweets say they consider themselves environmentalists, and they work with environmental groups. Darrel, a past president of the California Cattlemen's Association, is a CCA rancher representative on the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition. Born in 2004, the coalition is a roundtable for the government, landowners, and groups such as the Sierra Club and Defenders of Wildlife to discuss land management issues.



All of this effort won't mean much if the younger generations of ranching families decide not to ranch anymore. So Darrel and Karen Sweet take heart when they hear young Blake say, as he did recently, that he is grateful to live, as not everyone can, where the eagles soar overhead.

On a chilly winter day, the Sweethouse fills with the hearty smell of Karen Sweet's hamburger soup. She made it with what she calls, with a chuckle, 'estate beef.' The house itself is classic—cross-stitch embroidery on the walls, potpourri, pictures of grand-children—not a hint of citified trendiness. Yet the way the Sweets talk while eating that soup—about conserving the environment, reinventing land deals, and working with other groups marks a great change from the old ways.

"I think in California in general we tend to be more progressive," says Darrel. "Partly because we're in a state with 38 million people."

There's no way ranchers are going to outvote the majority or outspend in politics, he says. Nonetheless, he points out that 22 million acres, or 28 percent of California, is privately owned rangeland. Another 19 million acres is publicly owned grazing land.

"That makes us relevant," Darrel continues. "It's probably why we've made more connections with the environmental movement. If we don't consider some of these things, we're going to be history."

### [The Buying Side Cattleman, Don Flanagan](#)

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