

The Bren School of Environmental Science and Management

MESM Group Project Proposal

Developing a Market-Based Strategy for Conserving and Managing Open Space in California's Big Sur Region

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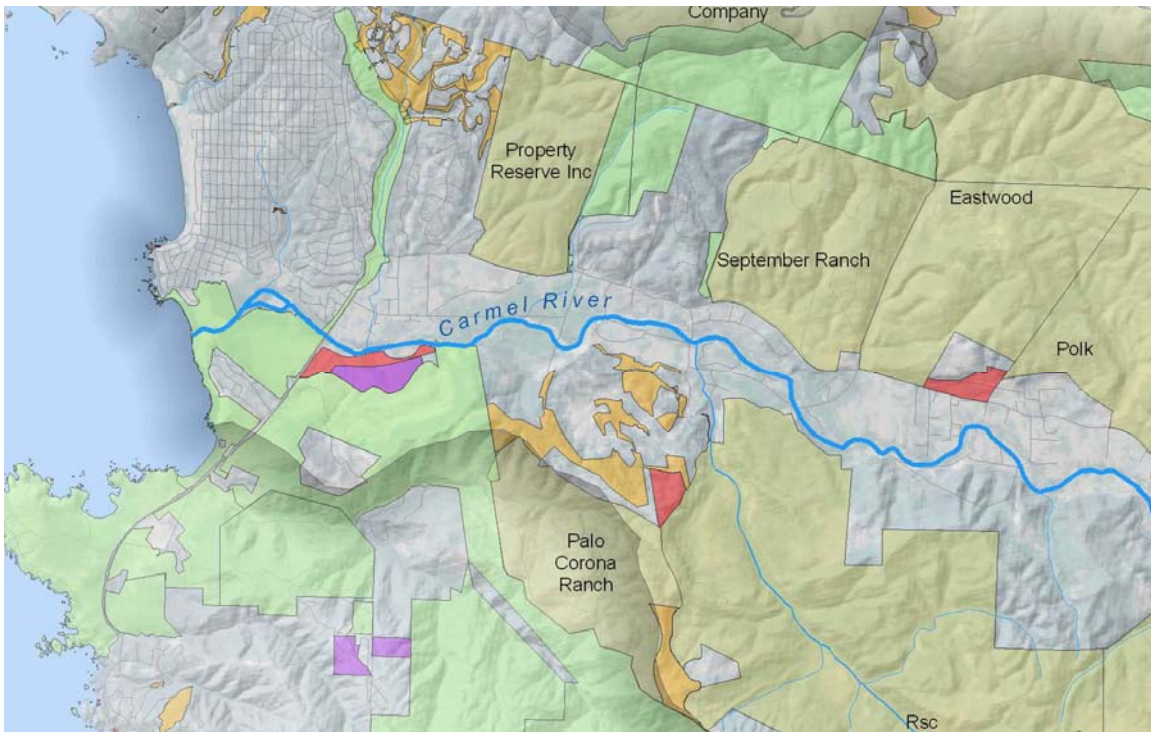
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Problem Statement

The Big Sur Land Trust is searching for new ways to conserve and manage open space in the Big Sur region. The Big Sur Land Trust would like to research and develop a business plan for an, "ecologically sustainable" cattle ranching cooperative. The Bren group project would seek to address the following questions:

1. Would an ecologically sustainable cattle ranching cooperative be economically viable on Big Sur lands?
2. What are some long term ecological indicators to monitor the cooperative's ecological sustainability?
3. What effective incentives can we establish for the ranchers to maintain the integrity of an ecologically sustainable cattle grazing cooperative?



Objectives

The group will create and evaluate a business plan for an ecologically sustainable cattle grazing cooperative. All key business plan components must be defined. These include: Vision Statement, Market Analysis, Competitive Analysis, Strategy, Services, Marketing and Sales and Operations.

Appropriate ecological indicators need to be established to determine the ecological sustainability of the grazing management plan. Literature regarding the ecological effects of cattle grazing is available as are management plans for other grazing cooperatives that focus on rangeland stewardship.

Thirdly we want to establish real-world incentives for the ranchers involved to maintain the integrity of a sustainable grazing cooperative. Specifically: How do we keep ranchers from moving to another market that would lead to less ecologically sustainable grazing practices? How do we keep ranchers from separating from the cooperative and selling on their own? Should “grass banking” be included as part of the cooperative’s activities?

Significance

The project significance is twofold. From the perspective of the ranching residents of the Big Sur area it allows them to continue their way of life. From a conservation perspective it allows for the preservation of open space in areas that would otherwise be more densely developed for human habitation.

Background

It is a critical time for the remaining large, intact ranchlands of the Big Sur region. Many of these lands are resource rich and represent some of the best opportunities left on the central coast of California to preserve globally significant but declining natural communities. Stand-alone ranches are no longer economically viable due to current market realities. Owners of these larger parcels are beginning to lean toward subdivision. Transferring ownership from traditional ranching uses to rural estate and small vineyard developments is seemingly their only feasible option. Even families with a long ranching history are considering sale of all or part of their property. This type of subdivision compromises the landscape’s conservation values due to loss of habitat, resource degradation, and fragmentation. Sky-rocketing real estate prices have made traditional land acquisition strategies a less viable tool for conservation.

Coincidentally, land trusts and public lands managers face increasing pressures to develop viable strategies for managing large tracts of land. Lack of stewardship funding and capacity is threatening to undermine the management resources protecting these lands. Loss of native coastal prairie, savanna and oak woodlands to invasive flora and fauna is the number one threat in many of these landscapes. As land managers look for solutions to landscape scale resource management, ecologically appropriate, service grazing is being considered as a possible tool where prescribed fire and other methods are not viable.

Approach

Our approach to developing a business plan will be to research existing business plans and books on writing business plans as well as conducting market research. Books to guide our business plan structure and examples of business plans are available in the UCSB library. In our market analysis we will look at market trends posted by trade associations and contact local beef sellers to see if they would be interested in carrying Big Sur cooperative cattle. We also need to determine our market competition. Who else is supplying locally grown rangeland beef to the central coast? This information can also be gathered from beef sellers in the region. We will also speak to the land trust and potential cooperative ranchers to establish goals and a vision for the cooperative. Working with The Big Sur Land Trust we will choose a sensible structure for the cooperative given available resources in the region.

The Big Sur Land Trust has offered the 10,000 acre Palo Corona regional park area (see map), which adjoins 30,000 acres of public and private conservation land, as a site to “pilot” this business model. The trust has also developed a grazing plan. Our group research will examine how this plan would be carried out on the Palo Corona site. This will require cataloging some of the native and non-native flora and fauna in potential grazing areas. Grazing land ecology literature as well as rangeland studies from nearby areas like Sedgwick Reserve will help us establish ecological indicators of rangeland health.

In designing incentives for ranchers involved in the cooperative we will look at incentives used by other cooperatives. It will also be necessary to understand the market for the type of beef that will be sold. This will require market research as to market prices and demand in California and other markets the cooperative might enter. This can be found through trade organization publications as well as by interviewing and surveying local sellers. Interviewing potential ranchers in the area will also be necessary in order to understand their hopes and concerns about joining an ecologically sustainable cooperative.

Stakeholders

Local family ranchers who wish to continue their way of life will become leaders in their industry by producing quality beef in an ecologically friendly way. Ecologically conscious California beef consumers will be given the opportunity to buy beef ranches with sound rangeland stewardship. Residents and visitors to California’s central coast will be able to enjoy the views and open spaces that make the Big Sur region so special.

Deliverables

The proposed project will produce a business plan for sustainable cattle grazing in the Big Sur Region. Significant documents within or relating to the business plan will be:

- 1) A grazing/conservation management plan for the area with long term indicators of success
- 2) Marketing strategies for a Big Sur sustainable beef cooperative
- 3) A plan of incentives to maintain the integrity of the Big Sur beef cooperative

Funding

Some funding is available as part of a gift from the Dean Whitter Foundation with potential for supplemental funding solicited in collaboration with the Big Sur Land Trust.

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