

# Producer Stories

**Sierra Valley Ranch**  
**Calpine, California**

2009

## From Upper Feather River Watershed Farmers and Ranchers

Sierra Valley Ranch is situated in Sierra and Plumas Counties at 5,000 ft elevation. This mountain valley receives snowmelt and runoff on the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada. Several major streams and tributaries run through the ranch including the Middle Fork Feather River, Craycroft Creek, Cold Stream, and the Westside Canal.

The ranch is a seasonal summer grazing operation for 2,000 commercial cow-calf pairs. The water flowing through the property is one of the most valuable assets of this largest ranch in Sierra Valley. However, years of seasonal flood damage and mismanagement had left the irrigation system non-functional. Marsh grasses had taken over much of the low-lying areas while the elevated areas of the meadows had lost production of higher quality grasses.

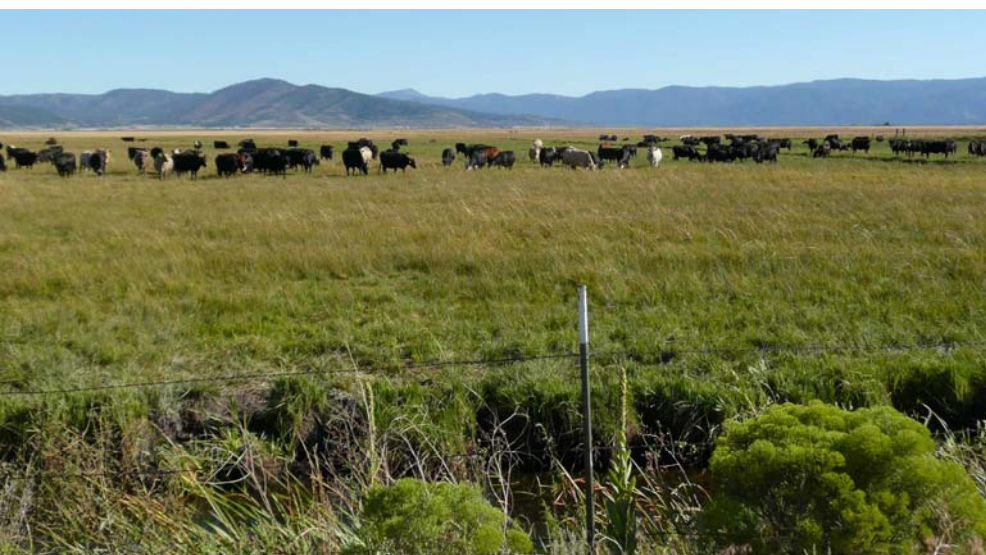
The Eric Roen family purchased the ranch in 1995 with a clear vision of the tremendous potential of this historic ranch with its vast native meadows and rangelands and the idle water rights. Ranch manager Paul Roen knew that the repair and improvement of the irrigation structures would be a big job. But, the potential to improve the productivity and economic viability of the ranch by re-establishing water control was obvious. Three truckloads of culverts, a D6 Cat and 320 Excavator were used to repair and upgrade 15 major irrigation system structures. Recycled 25,000 lb. gondola cars obtained from a railroad salvage contractor were installed as main channel weirs and have proven to better withstand the winter floods than wooden structures.

As anticipated, production of higher quality grasses and riparian health have improved greatly with the return of controlled irrigation to the meadowlands of the ranch.



### *Management Highlights*

- ◆ Repair 15 major irrigation structures damaged by seasonal floods and negligence
- ◆ Improve water distribution from 600 irrigated acres to 6000 acres
- ◆ Install fencing to control grazing and protect streambanks
- ◆ Participate in local on-ranch water quality monitoring to evaluate management practices
- ◆ Increase livestock carrying-capacity by 60% to boost the profitability of the ranch



# An advocate for Sierra Valley Water Rights and Water Quality

## ***Taking the Lead in Stewardship***

Leadership comes naturally for the manager of this historic ranch. Paul is active in two local agricultural water groups: Sierra Valley Mutual Water Company and Upper Feather River Watershed Group. One group focuses on water rights and the other group deals with water quality concerns. Paul and the Sierra Valley Ranch were recently awarded Conservation Awards for their agriculture water quality accomplishments.



*“It was an easy solution to see. The water rights were there, we just needed to get a handle on its use.”*

With the rotational grazing plan, cattle arriving to the valley from winter pastures in the lower foothills are turned out to the sage and early grass lands. When that is utilized they are moved to the irrigated fields. This plan allows grasses to be fed at their peak nutritional value. There has been a substantial increase in weight gains in the market calves as a result of this program.

Irrigation water control is key to forage quality as well as quantity. “Grass management is directly related to our bottom line, which depends on pounds of beef across the scale at market time.”



## ***Ranch Goals***

- *Continue to improve water-use efficiency with engineered structure modifications*
- *Coordinate grazing and irrigation management to refurbish higher quality grasses*
- *Develop partnerships to assist with stream bank stabilization and conservation efforts*
- *Maintain profitability in the fluctuating economic climate by targeting niche beef markets*

*“Good stewardship provides profitability.”*



**University of California Cooperative Extension** (<http://ucanr.org/waterquality>)

**Upper Feather River Watershed Group** (<http://www.ufrwg.org>)

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