



California Rancher Success Story

Five Dot Ranch Sustains Sage Grouse & Produces Natural Beef

By Steve Stuebner



Todd Swickard (center) and family enjoy horseback riding on the Five Dot Ranch.

The Swickard family takes pride in a pasture to plate operation. Their natural beef customers support a ranch dedicated to healthy cattle and plentiful wildlife, with a focus on sage grouse on property near Susanville, California.



Once numbering some 16 million before settlement, sage grouse have dwindled to as few as 200,000 birds. Their survival depends on conserving vast, intact sagebrush lands in the west.

Swickard Family Runs Ranch, Market & Restaurant

Todd and Loretta Swickard run a large cattle ranch in the Willow Creek Valley near Susanville, California, where the Sierra-Nevada Mountains converge with the Cascade Range and the Great Basin. It's a mile-high valley with heavy timber to the west, forests and open space to the north, and sagebrush for many miles to the east.

The family stays plenty busy operating the Five Dot Ranch, raising approximately 5,000 cattle in a natural quality beef program, while carefully managing their private lands and public grazing allotments.

The Swickards have three daughters; all of them work in the Napa Valley Oxbow Market, marketing the ranch's natural beef program and running the associated restaurant. Their son helps in the cattle side of the business. The family operation has grown considerably from the days when Todd's father, Jack, started the business in 1959 with 200 registered Hereford cattle. Historically, the ranch dates back to 1852.



Five Dot Ranch markets its antibiotic-free and sustainably raised beef at the Napa Valley Oxbow Market, and sells their meat in several Bay area locations. See: www.fivedotranch.com

Wildlife-friendly Grazing

The Swickards apply rest-rotation grazing systems that support a variety of imperiled fish and wildlife species, including sage grouse. Much of their work to improve sage grouse habitat is focused to the north and east of their home ranch near open sagebrush lands, and they co-exist with other species elsewhere in California.

“We’ve got lots of different issues and quite a few endangered species,” says Todd Swickard. “We try our best to take care of all of them. We share the land with lots of other people and animals. We try to work it so it benefits everybody.”

The reputation of the Five Dot Ranch is important to the Swickards, because their natural beef customers care about how the animals are raised and how ranch operations and livestock impact the environment.

“We are committed to providing the best tasting beef California has to offer while working closely to promote stewardship of the land in a sustainable, environmentally conscious manner,” the Swickards say on their web site: fivedotranch.com.

“We share the land with lots of other people and animals. We try to work it so it benefits everybody.”
~ Todd Swickard

The Swickards operate the Five Dot Ranch Cookhouse in the Oxbow Public Market, which includes a restaurant and retail store. They’ve been selling natural beef raised on California rangelands for the past 8 years to grocery stores and restaurants. They also graze livestock on lands in the San Francisco Bay area, lands that recreationists and nature lovers enjoy.

Five Dot Ranch Enlists in Sage Grouse Initiative

When the Natural Resources Conservation Service started the Sage Grouse Initiative in 2010 to provide cost-share funding to ranchers who want to improve sage grouse habitat on private lands in 11 western states, the Swickards embraced the innovative program. They wanted to see what they could do to help sage grouse habitat on their ranch properties northeast of Susanville.

Since then, they have worked to restore the treeless sagebrush country that sage grouse depend upon by cutting invading junipers on 3,300 acres of private lands around Horse Lake and Hayden Hill. The Swickards have removed old fencing and replaced it with wildlife-friendly fence, installed special reflectors on the top wire of new fencing to reduce collisions with sage grouse, improved riparian areas with rest-rotation grazing systems, and keep cattle herds on the move with cowboys to ensure rangelands are not overused.

“The Swickards are good operators,” says Ceci Dale-Cesmat, NRCS State Rangeland Management Specialist. “They do value-added grazing. They’re always thinking about the resource base and how they can make things better.”

Removing Junipers Restores Sage Grouse Habitat

The Swickards started with juniper control efforts about four years ago, working with Dale-Cesmat to develop a plan for removing the juniper trees that pose the highest risk to sage grouse and on lands where the benefits will be highest.

Juniper trees invading lands where they historically would not have grown can be harmful to rangelands. The trees crowd out other plant species, consume large amounts of water (60 gallons per mature tree per day), and create a perching spot for species that prey on sage grouse, such as crows, ravens, magpies, owls and hawks. A recently published scientific study, with SGI funding contributing to the research, shows that with just four percent tree cover coming in near leks, the birds abandon their traditional courtship dancing grounds.

The Sage Grouse Initiative focuses on removing the advancing line of trees into important habitat without the historic forces of wildfire to keep them at bay. Where trees aren’t a thick forest, the bunchgrasses and sagebrush beneath them are still in good shape. Rather than simply cutting the trees and scattering them, Five Dot Ranch found a way to recycle the juniper wood. The contractor, Tubit Enterprises (Burney, California) used heavy equipment to grind the junipers into chips.



The lush Horse Lake Meadow is ideal for sage grouse broods seeking insects and forbs. The Swickards delay grazing here until later in summer to give the birds time to nest and raise their young.

Juniper Chips Power a Co-Generation Plant

The contractor sold the chips to a co-generation plant as an energy resource, reducing the overall cost of the treatments. Normally juniper removal costs \$80-\$250 per acre. The Honey Lake biomass/geothermal plant provides local power to the Susanville area, and in the summer of 2012, the plant played a big role when PG&E had numerous outages because of wildfires. The Honey Lake plant kept the lights on during the outages,



In most cases the Swickards cut smaller junipers, but larger ones did come down where they posed a threat to sage grouse in otherwise open country. Trees offer perches for predators.

producing 30 megawatt-hours of electricity, nearly half powered by the juniper wood chips harvested for SGI conservation projects.

In instances where junipers sparsely dotted the landscape on the Five Dot Ranch, posing a threat to sage grouse, ranch crews used chainsaws to cut and limb the trees, hauling out the main stems for firewood.

The Swickards treated a total of about 6,000 acres – doubling the treatments cost-shared by NRCS, and the results have made “a tremendous difference,” Swickard says. “The encroachment of junipers was one of the biggest issues on our lands. It’s opened up the range for the perennial plants and forbs to grow, and that has made things much better for our cattle, deer and antelope. Really all of the wildlife benefit from that.”

The juniper-treatment areas centered on the Horse Lake and Hayden Hill private land areas to the north of the Five Dot Ranch base property. Those lands are adjacent to Bureau of Land Management federal lands, where the agency is doing similar juniper-control work to benefit rangelands and sage grouse.

“We’re fortunate to have the biomass plant nearby,” Swickard says, noting that the plant’s proximity makes things more economical for grinding up junipers. “It’s a double benefit because you’re getting rid of the junipers and you’re creating green energy.”

Fencing with Wildlife in Mind

Five Dot Ranch also installed approximately four miles of new wildlife-friendly fence to replace old barbed-wire fence to benefit sage grouse and other critters. The fencing is part of Five Dot’s rest-rotation grazing management system, allowing the Angus cattle to move from one pasture to the next during the spring-summer-fall grazing season.

Wildlife-friendly fencing has a smooth wire and a large gap at the bottom to allow antelope, small mammals and sage grouse to pass under. It also has reflectors on the top wire to improve visibility for sage grouse and prevent the birds from striking the top wire.

As an example of rest-rotation grazing systems, Swickard talked about grazing a riparian area on private land in the



Note the smooth wire and large gap at the bottom of this fence so that pronghorn, sage grouse and other wildlife can get through to the other side safely.

spring, and then resting it until the fall, allowing the plants in the creek-side area to flourish during the summer growing season. That allows sage grouse and other wildlife to use the area without competing with cattle.

“The sage grouse like coming into those riparian areas,” he says. “At Horse Lake, a lot of them come into our meadows, and sometimes, their chicks are with them.”

Tracking Rangeland Health Key to Success

As part of the SGI improvements on Five Dot Ranch private lands, Swickard and his range crews keep close track of rangeland health via photo monitoring and more detailed plant monitoring, grass stubble heights, and more.

Under the Sage Grouse Initiative contract with the NRCS, Five Dot Ranch committed to range monitoring on nearly 5,000 acres of land in the Hayden Hill and Horse Lake areas. NRCS range specialists double-check the data that Five Dot Ranch provides to ensure accuracy. The information then helps managers adjust practices as needed to make them even better for wildlife.

In the same general area in Lassen County, Swickard works with the BLM to monitor lands around Eagle Lake to check on water quality.

“Sometimes we work with the agencies to monitor our grazing, sometimes we do it on our own,” Swickard says in an article for California Rangelands (carangelands.org).



One way to monitor rangelands is to use a tape measure like this one on Five Dot Ranch. Rancher Swickard and his crew look at plant diversity, grass heights, and more.

“We’re all starting to realize that managed grazing is critical to the long-term health of rangelands and that monitoring is the key to documenting our success.” ~ Todd Swickard

Conservation Easement Protects Wetlands

Five Dot Ranch also has a conservation easement under NRCS’s Wetland Reserve Program on 740 acres in the Horse Lake area to preserve a wetland for sage grouse, waterfowl and other wildlife species. The easement requires deferring livestock grazing in the meadow area until July 15 to manage the land for sage grouse nesting and brood-rearing, and to allow for the nesting of wetland wildlife, such as sandhill cranes. Specific grass stubble height and grazing use standards are stipulated in the agreement to ensure there is enough nesting cover under the sagebrush for sage grouse. Regular monitoring is conducted.

“The intent is to allow for nesting cover for sage grouse and minimize disturbance during the nesting season,” says Nate Key, Wetland Reserve Program team leader for the NRCS in Yuba City. The meadows also attract and support sandhill cranes, migratory waterfowl and shorebirds.



Protecting and managing Horse Lake Meadow as a lush oasis for sage grouse broods is important to bird survival. The meadows also shelter sandhill cranes, waterfowl, and shorebirds.

2012 Wildfire Took Its Toll on Sagebrush

Local sage grouse populations should benefit from the habitat improvements made by Five Dot Ranch in Lassen County, according to biologists with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. But much of the birds’ range in Northeast California was dramatically affected by the 315,500-acre Rush wildfire in August 2012.



The Willow Creek Valley remains a beautiful, undeveloped valley today, thanks to the continuing ranching heritage on private lands combined with public lands. The Five Dot Ranch was spared from the 2012 Rush Fire and offers refuge to sage grouse as they rebuild their numbers after habitat loss.

The fire burned more than 270,000 acres in California and the rest in Nevada, consuming mostly sagebrush habitat. It was the second-largest wildfire in California since the early 1930s. Wildfire is one of the biggest threats to sage grouse in the Great Basin.

The wildfire destroyed the core of the remaining habitat for sage grouse in Northeast California, says Brian Ehler, environmental scientist for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. Overall, sage grouse populations have declined 60 percent since the fire, Ehler said.

“The fire took out everything the sage grouse need. It was devastating,” he says. “This area was the best habitat in the state before the fire.”

Five Dot Ranch Habitat Spared from Fire

Even so, the areas that the Swickards have improved for sage grouse did not burn. “The local improvements will help once the sage grouse find them,” Ehler says, emphasizing that sage grouse are still on the Swickard property that connects to a couple of leks in the area.

In addition to managing their private lands, the Swickards are the largest public lands grazing permittee in the state. For the family, the concept of managing for particular fish or wildlife species on private and public lands is something they’ve been doing for a long time. They manage for Carson Wandering Skipper Butterflies, bald eagles, California tiger salamanders, California red-legged frogs and more. According to scientists, the butterfly subspecies is found only in Lassen County, Calif., and Washoe County, Nevada.

“We’re OK with that. It’s just the way we do things,” Swickard says. “It’s important to us that our operations are sustainable in the long term.”

The Swickards know that they have to back up the messages conveyed in their marketing materials, such as sustainably raised natural beef.

“In the Bay area, people are very cognizant of where their food comes from,” says Loretta “Lori” Swickard. “We track all of our animals for three years, from conception to plate.”

For more about the Five Dot Ranch, see: www.fivedotranch.com.

About the Author: Steve Stuebner (@SteveStuebner) is a longtime journalist based in Boise, Idaho. He is also the author/producer of stories for Life on the Range.