

**MCL Ag Land Use Committee**  
Friday, October 30, 2015, Marin County Farm Bureau  
FINAL Minutes, approved 4/7/16

Judy Teichman and Sally Gale co-chaired the meeting, 10 to 12:15 at the Marin County Farm Bureau in Pt. Reyes Station. There were about 40 people present, including representatives from a number of organizations. Other MCL board members present included Judy and Sally, also Nona Dennis, Bob Johnston, Linda Novy, Kate Powers, Susan Stompe, and Ann Thomas. At least 7 ranches or ranch families represented by the 13 or so ranchers/farmers/spouses present, along with representatives from MALT, Marin RCD, Committee for the Preservation of Tule Elk, and Marin Native Plant Society.

The major topic of this meeting was coastal grassland with presentations followed by brief updates on other items of interest. UCCE Extension Services Director David Lewis moderated the meeting and introduced speakers.

**The Coastal Prairie: Then and Now; Strategies for Survival.**

Dr. James Bartolome, Natural Resources Graduate School, UC Berkeley. Dr. Bartolome briefly described the development over millions of years of grass as a dominant plant form, use of fossil records, climate's relation to plant and animal evolution, and the state's major grass types. His comments included the following:

- The geology of the state and Marin County largely resulted from the friction, or collision, between the North American and Pacific tectonic plates, with the rise of the Sierra Nevada – about five million years ago - creating the coastal zone on its western side with the Mediterranean climate we know today. The late Pleistocene was heavily affected by ice ages with the associated lower sea levels opening up large continental plains.
- The ancestor of grass, about 125 million years ago, was likely a small herb that grew on the edge of the tropics. Then a mutation in the way plants grew led to alternating long and short cells, which are found in grasses today. In the Myocene (roughly 10 to 5 million years ago) grasses became the dominant plant and now cover about 50 percent of the earth's surface.
- There are about 10,000 species of grass, which is the world's most important plant. With corn, rice, and wheat among members of the grass family, a large portion of the calories that humans take in come from this family.
- In the coastal prairie the dominant grasses have characteristics of the early grasses, and come from a group that evolved in the southern continents.
- Animals evolved along with grasses. Evolution of teeth, as noted in fossils, indicates diet. The La Brea tar pits in Los Angeles have been a valuable repository of knowledge about this. In Pt. Reyes, during the late Pleistocene there were large grazing animals – we know this in part because of the large number of predators also present. People showed up in California about 14,000 years ago and at that time most of the large mammals disappeared. Along with the presence of humans, however, there were big climate changes, a warming after the ice age, which could also have been a factor in the disappearance of the large grazing animals.
- There are three general types of grassland in California: coastal prairie, largely comprised of perennials; further from the coast is coast range grassland with annuals mixed in with coastal

grasses; further east is valley grassland, comprised mainly of annuals from the Mediterranean. Troublesome species, such as barbed goat grass, medusa head, and yellow star thistle show up increasingly as you move east.

Dr. Stephanie Larsen, Director of Sonoma County UCCE. Stephanie spoke to the synergistic results of a working landscape used for forage or other ranching that also reduces invasive weeds, facilitating restoration and providing other ecosystem benefits. Some of her general comments were as follows:

- A working landscape can provide ecosystem services including food, habitat, heritage values, and view shed. Benefits from a working landscape can include 1) carbon sequestration, air and water quality, pollination, and extensive wildlife habitat; 2) healthy foods and diversified products; 3) forage and tree production, habitat, and biodiversity.
- We should ask ourselves these questions: How can policy and planning conserve the landscape? How can we encourage good management and enterprise? What are desired ecological outcomes and how achieved?
- Conservation and a working landscape need these elements: pasture management, a sustainable ranching enterprise, and a year-round forage supply from a mix of private, leased and public lands. Ranchers need an affordable year-round forage supply that fits the livestock calendar, and management based on site potential.
- Grazing can reduce undesirable plants and open the landscape to beneficial habitat.
- A rancher can be viewed as an ecosystem engineer with ranching providing ecosystem services such as: 1) creating habitats, local and landscape effects; 2) maintaining water developments, watching out for vandalism; 3) managing grazing for fire hazard reduction; 4) maintaining networks of stock ponds.
- The NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service) and Marin RCD (Resource Conservation District) have cost-sharing programs to help agricultural operators to improve the environment and habitat.
- Amenity and production values are both needed to conserve a large property.
- Today, traditional ranching on large properties is declining while smaller operations on the rural landscape are increasing.
- A critical mass of producer community is needed to support the production and marketing infrastructure underlying the community. In effect, a loss of ranches in itself increases the loss of ranches.

Michelle Cooper, MALT Stewardship Department. Michelle described some of the adaptation mechanisms of present day grasses and forbs, focused on oat grass (*Danthonia californica*) as an outstanding example of a naïve perennial that is relished by cattle and withstands poor soils. She distributed oat grass stalks to attendees for examples while she spoke.

- Eighty percent of California native grasses are perennial.
- Oat grass is an example of a successful native. The root system can be three to four feet long, making it durable in drought and with the ability hold soil. It is also super-nutritious and cattle like it – so it often doesn't get a chance to reproduce because it gets eaten.
- Natives thrive in poor soil. Richer soil is better for encouraging forage.

- In the last 150,000 years the planet has undergone a series of ice ages, which have lowered sea levels. Another one should be due but seems slow in coming.
- Our Mediterranean grassland is a non-equilibrium system, one in which things constantly change driven by unpredictable like the weather.

### **Other Business.**

Update on PRNS Ranch Management Plan and Elk Herd in Pastoral Zone: Judy said that Melanie Gunn, the spokesperson for the Park Service on the Ranch Management Plan was unable to make this meeting but according to an August Update on the Ranch Management website the results of testing for John's disease has been negative. Judy also referenced an article in the most recent *Bay Nature* magazine about Tule Elk at the Seashore. It referenced meetings of ranchers and representatives of a variety of other environmental organizations to talk about the elk and how their presence in the pastoral zone may be dealt with in the Ranch Management Plan. Burr Heneman said the article is not entirely accurate. Burr and Nona Dennis described the meetings as an opportunity for ranchers and others to meet with Park staff to exchange views. They felt the meetings were productive. One rancher present said he would have liked to have participated and regretted it was not a more open process.

### **Update on MCL Board Activities.**

Invasive Species Management. Nona noted MCL recently approved an expanded IPM (Integrated Pest Management) policy paper in support of IPM and how it works beneficially to protect biodiversity and address fire risk.

Agricultural Policy Working Group. Sally reported an ad hoc committee of board members that she has chaired for several months has developed an expanded policy paper on agriculture and the final draft will go to the board for approval in November.

Local Coastal Plan. A letter was sent to the Coastal Commission essentially in support of the agricultural component approved by the Board of Supervisors in August.

**Adjournment.** Meeting adjourned at 12:15 p.m. The next meeting will be on January 22, 2016.

Notes: Thomas...

List of attendees (probably incomplete, some info is missing)

Al Poncia	Nancy Scolari	George Clyde
Cathy Poncia	John Hart	B? Kexcp?
Bob Johnston	Jim Jenson	Ted McIsaac
Bruce Keegan	Gordon Bennett	Susan Stompe
Corinne White	Carolyn Longstreth	Sam Dolcini
Ann Thomas	Kate Powers	Marie Hoff
Robert Eichstaedt	Gordon White	Linda Novy
Nona Dennis	Lina Aoyama	Christian ?
Tish Brown	Dylan Voeller	Jackie Grossi
Hunter Wallof	Sally Gale	Rich Grossi

Kathy Lucchesi  
Gino Lucchesi  
Kevin Lunny  
Judy Teichman  
David Lewis  
Michelle Cooper  
Dr. James Bartolome  
Ernie (?) Spaletta  
Burr Heneman  
Loren Poncia  
Paul DaSilva