

History of Rangeland Management in California

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by Stephanie Larson-Praplan

On the Ground

- Spanish colonists brought cattle to California when they landed in San Diego in 1769, with two hundred head of cattle arriving by overland routes.
- Mexico, achieving independence, established rules to petition for land grants in California, paving the way for additional settlers by making land grants easier to obtain.
- The Gold Rush resulted in cattle numbers quadrupling and sheep numbers increasing more than 60-fold between 1850 and 1860.
- Multiple uses, such as agriculture crop production, impacted California rangelands.
- Public policies now influence management of approximately 38 million acres of privately and publicly owned rangelands.

Keywords: ranching history in California, Gold Rush impacts on rangelands, public policies on rangelands.

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The California rangelands comprise approximately 25% of California's land surface area, and have evolved over hundreds of years to current management practices and species now present. These rangelands played a central role in the history and legend of California, from the Spanish colonists to present-day generational ranching families. Through all its changes, rangelands still remain a diverse land type throughout California. The 2015 Society for Range Management meeting focuses on managing California rangeland diversity, a result of California's vibrant past.¹

Spanish Era

While Christopher Columbus imported European livestock to the New World in 1493, Spanish colonists did not bring cattle to California until they landed in San Diego in 1769. Two hundred head of cattle arrived by overland routes during 1769.¹ Additional missions followed in rapid succession and, by 1823, a chain of 21 missions extended along the coast from San Diego to Sonoma. Missions were colonizing agents of the Spanish government and were not intended to be permanent. Mission ranches occupied most of the lands in the coastal region held by the Spaniards, about one-sixth of the total area of the state. Burcham² estimated that more than 400,000 cattle, 61,600 horses, and 300,000 sheep grazed on the pastoral empire of the missions. The Spanish never extended their livestock husbandry into the Central Valley of California, but the local Indians acquired animals from the missions and drove them into the San Joaquin Valley. By 1819, they were breeding their own stock.³ Many of these animals escaped, resulting in large feral herds. McCullough³ cites numerous reports that observed herds of wild cattle and horses in the Sacramento Valley in 1849, the area around Petaluma in 1838, and other parts of Sonoma County in 1851.

Mexican Era

Mexico achieved independence from Spain in 1821, and California came under the control of the Mexican government. The 1824 Mexican Colony Law established rules for petitioning for land grants in California, and by 1828, the rules for establishing land grants were codified in the Mexican Reglamento (Regulation). These Acts sought to break the monopoly of the missions and also paved the way for additional settlers to California by making land grants easier to obtain. This made land, such as the Russian colony's (Fort Ross), available to others. Found along the Sonoma Coast, this land is today a state park that can be visited to see how the Russians settled the area. The procedure included a *dis-eño* (a hand-drawn topological map) to define the area. The Mexican Governors of Alta California gained the power to grant state lands, and many of the Spanish concessions were subsequently patented under Mexican law.

¹ For more information on the 2015 Society for Range Management Annual Meeting, see <http://www.rangelands.org/events/>.

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