

## **Sustaining Ecosystem Services From Private Lands in California: The Role of the Landowner**

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# Sustaining Ecosystem Services From Private Lands in California: The Role of the Landowner

By Shasta Ferranto, Lynn Huntsinger, and Maggi Kelly

## On the Ground

- California landownerships are changing—becoming smaller and more amenity-driven, with important implications for ecosystem service production.
- Residence on the property, larger property size, source of income from the land, having a long-term outlook, and using an advisory service are associated with landowner management for ecosystem services for the owner and for society.
- Advisory services like Cooperative Extension and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, as well as private consultants and professional organizations, have an important role in the future of ecosystem service production.

**Keywords:** land tenure, fragmentation, landowner behavior, advisory services, Cooperative Extension, income, working landscapes, property size, long-term outlook, California rangelands.

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The term “ecosystem services” was coined to express the value of natural systems to human well-being—a straightforward definition is “the benefits people obtain from ecosystems.”<sup>1</sup> Achieving sustainability and maintaining flows of ecosystem services in California requires attention to private lands and their unique management constraints and opportunities. Forty percent, 13 million ha, of California’s forests and rangelands are privately owned.<sup>2</sup> Deserts and forests are mostly in government ownership, while the state’s Mediterranean rangelands are largely in private hands; for example, more than 80% of hardwood rangelands and annual grasslands are in private ownership.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, many ecosystem services are a result of social ecological systems that include livestock grazing and forestry.<sup>4</sup> Landowner participation in sustaining ecosystem services means conservation initiatives need to build on landowner management objectives, practices, and goals. Moreover, private landscapes are often fragmented into multiple parcels where decisions are made by numerous individuals with diverse goals, and this fragmentation is increasing. These trends influence the capacity of the ecosystem to provide ecosystem services,<sup>5</sup> and increase the need for outreach and cooperative management.

## The Landowner Profile Is Changing

Prior to 1950, rural land use in the United States was typically agriculture. From 1950 to 1970 rural residents began moving to urban centers for economic and social opportunities. Migration slowed in the 1980s, and then picked back up again in the 1990s in what is commonly referred to as the “rural rebound,” an in-migration of new residents into rural America largely driven by those seeking a rural lifestyle. Between 1970 and 2010 approximately 27,114 ha/year of forest and rangeland were converted to urban development (defined as more than 1 house/2 ha) and 47,000 ha/year were converted to exurban development (more than 1 house per 8 acres). Since 1950 there has been a five-fold increase in exurban development.<sup>6</sup> In California, between 1940 and 2000, 10% of private forests and rangelands were fragmented into areas with more than 1 house/8 ha.<sup>2</sup> These trends are expected to continue with almost 2 million ha of forest and rangeland considered at medium to high risk for future development.<sup>2</sup> Many forest and rangeland owners report being approached by speculators to sell their land for development.<sup>7</sup>

The rural rebound brought changes to rural communities, particularly in amenity-rich regions. New landowners include retirees, younger people seeking a slower pace of life, professionals who can commute or work remotely from urban areas, and seasonal homeowners. A longitudinal study based on a 1985 survey of California hardwood rangeland landowners

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