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California cattle ranchers fight to survive

Carolyn Lochhead, Chronicle Washington Bureau
Sunday, January 30, 2011

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Michael Macor / The Chronicle

David Evans owns Rogers Ranch at Point Reyes. Evans' family has raised cattle for generations, but he says the consolidation of meatpacking in the Midwest is making it increasingly difficult.

(01-30) 04:00 PST Washington - -- Great herds of tule elk once grazed the rolling grasslands of [California's](#) coast and Sierra foothills. Today it is cattle grazing on private ranches that preserves 20 million acres of incomparable landscape.

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The ranches are under pressure from many directions, including the consolidation of the meatpacking industry that has left few options to slaughter cows in California.

Modern packinghouses and feedlots, concentrated east of the Rocky Mountains, have become a symbol of factory farming and have left California ranchers - conventional and grass-finished - in a pinch because most of the two-dozen major slaughterhouses that existed in California in the 1980s are gone.

"We are seeing the toppling of the last critical mass of infrastructure around the country," said David Evans

of Marin Sun Farms, a fourth-generation rancher at [Point Reyes](#) Station who works with other ranchers to market California grass-finished beef locally.

"There is a small-farming entrepreneurial mecca in the Bay Area," he said, "but the access to the market is limited, because you cannot get it processed."

Complaints of price collusion are common. One California rancher who would not speak publicly said that when it comes to selling cattle, meat packers "all want to drink coffee out of the same cup," each offering ranchers the same low price for their cattle.

The **Obama** administration has proposed a rule that aims to address market abuses and rescue cattle from the fate of hogs and poultry, where growers work under one-sided contracts with large meat packers, a relationship described as "feudal" by Robert Taylor, an agricultural economist at Auburn University.

Giving farmers more power

The rule, now under review, generated 65,000 comments and a fierce blowback from packers. It is based on the Packers and Stockyards Act of 1921, which focused on the

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meatpacking cartel of a century ago. The change is meant to give more power to farmers in contracting and to revive shrinking auction markets.

Supporters of the rule see it as a first assault on the industrialized food system; it is also integral to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack's efforts to combat the "hollowing out" of rural towns by agribusiness.

The rule has provoked an uproar in cattle country. Some small livestock growers and their allies among sustainable-farm groups claim it is the last thing standing between cattle ranchers and annihilation. They point to the 40 percent decline in independently owned ranches since 1980 - from 1.3 million to 753,000.

"We are losing more ranches in this country each year than there are in the entire states of Arizona, Idaho, Montana and North Dakota," said Bill Bullard, president of R-Calf, a rancher group that supports the rule.

But many California ranchers, some of them at the vanguard of the "natural beef" movement, worry that the proposed rule could interfere with their efforts to provide the branded beef consumers increasingly want. Such beef is often grown under contract.

"It looks to me like ranchers who have tried to do a good job genetically, gone through organic certification, raised antibiotic-free and hormone-free beef - under the proposed rule I don't know if we'd be getting any premium," said Darrell Wood, owner of Leavitt Lake Ranches in Vina (Tehama County), which has been in his family since the 1860s. Wood won a national conservation award and raises grass-finished beef for Whole Foods.

Jim Warren, who raises as many as 2,000 cattle on leased land in the Central Coast and operates the 101 Livestock cattle auction in Aromas (San Benito County), selling 30,000 and 50,000 head of cattle a year, is also skeptical.

"This rule looks back, not forward," he said. "Maybe there was some manipulation ... that could have been corrected a long time ago and wasn't. But the reality is we need to look forward."



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