

**COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO
BOARD OF SUPERVISORS - LAND USE
WEDNESDAY, MAY 21, 2025**

MINUTE ORDER NO. 9

**SUBJECT: REVIEW OPTIONS TO PROMOTE AND EXPAND SUSTAINABLE
CATTLE GRAZING IN THE UNINCORPORATED COUNTY
(DISTRICTS: ALL)**

OVERVIEW

Over the past couple of decades, the practice of cattle grazing in the County has gone through many changes, shaped largely by ever-evolving environmental regulations, land management priorities and a growing emphasis on sustainability. To build upon this progress, and to bolster our approach to addressing the region's pressing environmental challenges - increasing wildfire risks, soil health degradation, disruptions to watersheds and biodiversity loss - today's item aims to evaluate potential programmatic options that support the expansion of sustainable cattle grazing in the unincorporated areas of the County. In the context of this item, sustainable grazing generally refers to the purposeful management of cattle by local ranchers in a way that maintains or enhances ecological functions. This includes practices that improve soil nutrient cycling, enhance erosion control, stimulate vegetation growth and/or reduce dependency on synthetic fertilizers and other chemical inputs.

When implemented effectively, cattle grazing can serve as a cost-efficient and environmentally responsible land management strategy, offering a suite of co-benefits: suppression of invasive plant species, reduction of wildfire fuel loads, enhanced carbon sequestration and improved water infiltration. By better aligning grazing practices with the County's broader sustainability and wildfire resiliency goals, we can reposition grazing as more than simply an agricultural activity. It can and should be valued as a multifunctional land management tool, integral to maintaining ecosystem health and climate adaptation strategies. Moreover, supporting the expansion of sustainable grazing offers an opportunity to strengthen local food systems, bolster the economic viability of ranching operations for local farmers and promote a nature-based approach to addressing environmental issues.

By re-evaluating the role of cattle grazing in unincorporated areas, the County has a meaningful opportunity to support working landscapes and local ranchers, while advancing several key strategic initiatives. Sustainable grazing isn't just a niche agricultural practice - it can serve as a powerful tool in our broader response to complex environmental challenges facing the region. It's time we gave our local ranchers the recognition and support they deserve.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

SUPERVISOR JIM DESMOND

1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to evaluate and present options to support the expanded use of cattle grazing as an ecosystem support strategy within the unincorporated areas of the County and report back with findings and recommendations within 180 days. This evaluation shall give consideration, but not be limited to:
 - a. Amending the County's Grading, Clearing, and Watercourses Ordinance (Ordinance) to recognize that well-managed cattle grazing can yield net environmental benefits, and as such may qualify for an exemption from the provisions of the Ordinance.

- i. Exemption Criteria: Develop exemption criteria through a collaborative stakeholder engagement process. Participants should include representatives from the local ranching community (e.g., California Cattlemen’s Association - San Diego, San Diego County CowBelles, individual ranchers), the San Diego County Farm Bureau, environmental advocacy groups, and local fire protection agencies.
 - ii. Consideration of Historical Agricultural Use: Develop exemptions for new grazing operations on lands with a documented history of agricultural use, even if such uses have not occurred within the last five years, thereby expanding eligibility beyond currently narrow limits. Acceptable evidence should be broad and inclusive, including items such as historical aerial imagery, business records, permit history, and other relevant documents.
- b. Identify and evaluate opportunities to expand and promote the use of County-owned properties for cattle grazing by local ranchers. Any such use should be consistent with the County’s wildfire prevention strategies and broader sustainability goals, ensuring that grazing activities contribute positively to ecological health and wildfire risk reduction.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The year-round threat of wildfires and other environmental challenges may disproportionately impact rural, low-income and/or underserved communities in the unincorporated areas where limited water infrastructure and other resources heighten vulnerabilities. Enhancing environmental outcomes through well-managed cattle grazing can help communities that face the greatest environmental risks.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Expanding sustainable cattle grazing in the County not only helps mitigate environmental challenges such as soil degradation, proliferation of invasive species, and wildfire risks, but it also supports local ranchers and strengthens our local food supply. Additionally, sustainable grazing can reduce the County’s reliance on synthetic chemicals and help bolster our overall approach to climate resiliency. Sustainable grazing is well suited to help advance the region's long-term environmental, economic, and societal sustainability objectives.

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no fiscal impact associated with today’s recommendations to direct staff to explore and options for expanding the use of cattle grazing. There will be no change in net General Fund costs and no additional staff years. There may be fiscal impacts associated with future related recommendations which staff would return to the Board for consideration.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

N/A

ACTION:

ON MOTION of Supervisor Desmond, seconded by Supervisor Anderson, the Board of Supervisors took action as recommended.

AYES: Anderson, Lawson-Remer, Montgomery Steppe, Desmond

ABSENT: (District 1 Seat Vacant)

State of California)
County of San Diego)

I hereby certify that the foregoing is a full, true and correct copy of the Original entered in the Minutes of the Board of Supervisors.

ANDREW POTTER
Clerk of the Board of Supervisors



Signed
by Andrew Potter