



JIM DESMOND
SUPERVISOR, FIFTH DISTRICT
SAN DIEGO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: May 21, 2025

09

TO: Board of Supervisors

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.

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**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

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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

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

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. In the late 1990's and early 2000s, cattle ranchers faced increasing scrutiny under a shifting regulatory landscape aiming to balance agricultural productivity with conservation goals. Government entities such as the County of San Diego, California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), and the Regional Water Quality Control Board (RWQCB) began implementing more stringent permitting and environmental review processes, aimed at addressing concerns over habitat degradation, soil erosion, and water quality impacts associated with unmanaged or poorly managed grazing. However, as our understanding of sustainable land management continues to evolve, it's becoming increasingly clear that we need to better recognize and promote advancements in the practice of cattle grazing, which may produce net ecological benefits.

Historically viewed through a dual lens - both as a potential environmental threat and as a valuable land management tool - grazing has been the subject of significant policy developments and robust debate regarding its role within the County's broader land use framework. In response to shifting sustainability goals, many ranchers have adapted their operations to embrace more environmentally conscious approaches. These efforts have begun to reshape the narrative around grazing, challenging long-standing assumptions about its incompatibility with ecological stewardship. Practices such as rotational grazing, limiting herd sizes, and collaborating with governmental and conservation organizations are increasingly common among ranchers committed to sustainable outcomes. Organizations such as the California Rangeland Conservation Coalition and the California Cattlemen's Association have played a pivotal role in supporting this transformation, promoting the integration of ecological principles into grazing operations. Their advocacy has helped reframe grazing not merely as an agricultural activity, but as a legitimate form of regenerative land use when applied with care and intention.

Additionally, by participating in programs like the County's Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) program, agricultural landowners are helping to safeguard open

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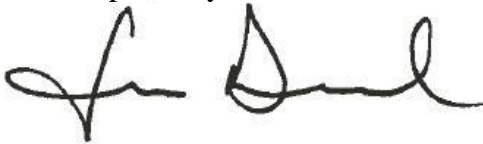
space, protect working landscapes and bolster the long-term economic viability of farming and ranching across the region. PACE offers financial incentives to agricultural property owners who voluntarily place permanent easements on their land to restrict future development and preserve agricultural uses.

In recognition of these advancements and contributions that ranchers have made, the County should take appropriate measures to better incentive and promote cattle grazing in the unincorporated areas. To move this effort forward, today's item directs the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to evaluate and present options to support and expand the use of cattle grazing as an ecosystems support strategy within the unincorporated areas of the County and report back with findings and recommendations, including cost and proposed funding source(s) within 180 days.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

Today's proposed action supports the Sustainability Initiative of the County of San Diego's 2025-2030 Strategic Plan.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jim Desmond', with a stylized, cursive script.

JIM DESMOND
Supervisor, Fifth District

ATTACHMENT(S)
N/A