

Rancher Attitudes and Participation in Conservation Easements in California

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Issue

Conservation easements are voluntary agreements between landowners and a government agency or non-profit organization, which restrict development activities on private land in return for financial and lifestyle benefits to the landowner. Conservation easements are one of the most important private land conservation tools available. Since 1997 in the Western United States, the rate of private land enrolled in conservation easements has outpaced the rate of private land development (Christensen et al. 2011). The increasing role of conservation easements on rangelands makes it especially important to understand why ranchers participate or do not participate in the conservation easement program. A commonly held view is that basic social values like views on private property rights and trust in government will influence the decision to participate in conservation easements. This Policy Brief provides an overview of ranchers' participation in the conservation easement program in California, as well as preliminary analyses of how rancher's attitudes relate to their levels of participation.

Key Findings

- Roughly 11% of California ranchers currently participate in a conservation easement program; another 19% plan to participate in the future.
- Although ranchers expressed a strong commitment to private property rights, these attitudes had no significant relationship to the likelihood of currently holding a conservation easement, or planning to in the future.
- In contrast, positive views about government's role in conservation significantly increase rates of current and future planned participation. However, this does not mean that views on property rights are inconsequential for decision-making on conservation easements, because individuals with a strong property rights orientation are less likely to have positive views of government.

Methodology

In partnership with the California Cattlemen's Association and the California Farm Bureau Federation, UC Davis researchers mailed surveys to 1,725 California ranchers. The survey was designed with substantial input from an advisory team consisting of UC Extension, ranchers, university researchers, and industry representatives. The ultimate goal of the survey was to improve understanding of land use decision-making on rangelands, including how rangeland practices relate to ecosystem services.

Of the ranchers surveyed, 475 responded (30%). Respondents' herd sizes ranged from 4 head of cattle to 23,000, with a median herd size of 350 animals. In total, survey respondents made land use decisions that affected 11,445,762 acres (nearly 18,000 square miles), including privately owned land, private land that respondents leased, public land that was leased, and land on which respondents were paid to graze cattle.

Detailed Results

Figure 1 indicates respondents' participation in a conservation easement program. While more than 15% of respondents were unaware of the program, the largest percentage (51.8) had heard of it and did not intend to participate. Small percentages (10.8) currently have at least one easement. A larger proportion of respondents (19.4) intend to participate in a conservation easement program in the future.

Figure 2 reports respondents' levels of agreement with attitudes hypothesized to influence participation in conservation easements: views on private property rights and the role of government in private land conservation.

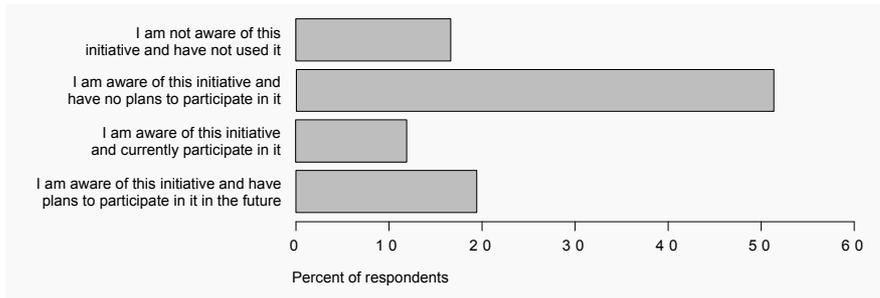


Figure 1: Ranchers' levels of participation in a conservation easement program. While a relatively small percentage of respondents have easements, a larger number intend to participate in the future.

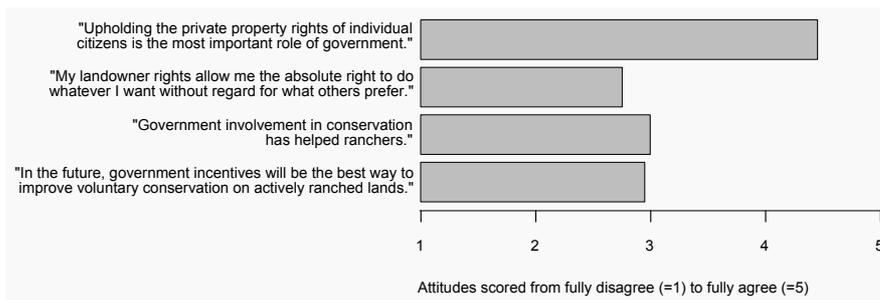


Figure 2: Ranchers' levels of agreement with several statements related to private property rights and the government's role in conservation.

Respondents agreed most strongly that “upholding the private property rights of individual citizens is the most important role of government.” The other statements elicited more neutral levels of agreement.

Based on a statistical analysis, Figure 3 shows how the likelihood of different levels of participation in a conservation easement is predicted to change if a respondent moves from completely disagreeing to completely agreeing with each of the attitude statements. Levels of agreement with the property rights questions have no significant relationship to the likelihood of participating on conservation easements. However, respondents who believe that government involvement in conservation has helped ranchers have significantly higher rates of current and future planned participation. Similarly, respondents who believe that government incentives are a useful tool for conservation are significantly less likely to be aware of conservation easements, but not participate.

Table 1 shows there are relationships among the basic social values. Respondents who agreed with either statement about private property rights tended to disagree with the statement that government involvement in conservation has helped ranchers. In addition, respondents who believe that government should uphold private property rights are less likely to view government incentives as a useful tool for conservation. Hence, while property rights views alone do not significantly affect conservation easement participation, they may potentially serve as a barrier to developing positive views on government's role in conservation.

Table 1: Correlation among responses to each of the attitude questions. Coefficients of correlation are presented as the first values, with standard errors given in parentheses. For most pairs of statements, correlations were significant, indicating strong relationships among core values.

	Private Property	Landowner Rights	Govt Incentives	Govt Involvement
Private Property	-	0.27 (0.03)***	-0.24 (0.03)***	-0.15 (0.03)**
Landowner Rights	-	-	-0.19 (0.05)***	-0.072 (0.05)
Govt Incentives	-	-	-	0.38 (0.04)***
Govt Involvement	-	-	-	-

Significance levels: * < 0.05, ** < 0.01, *** < 0.001

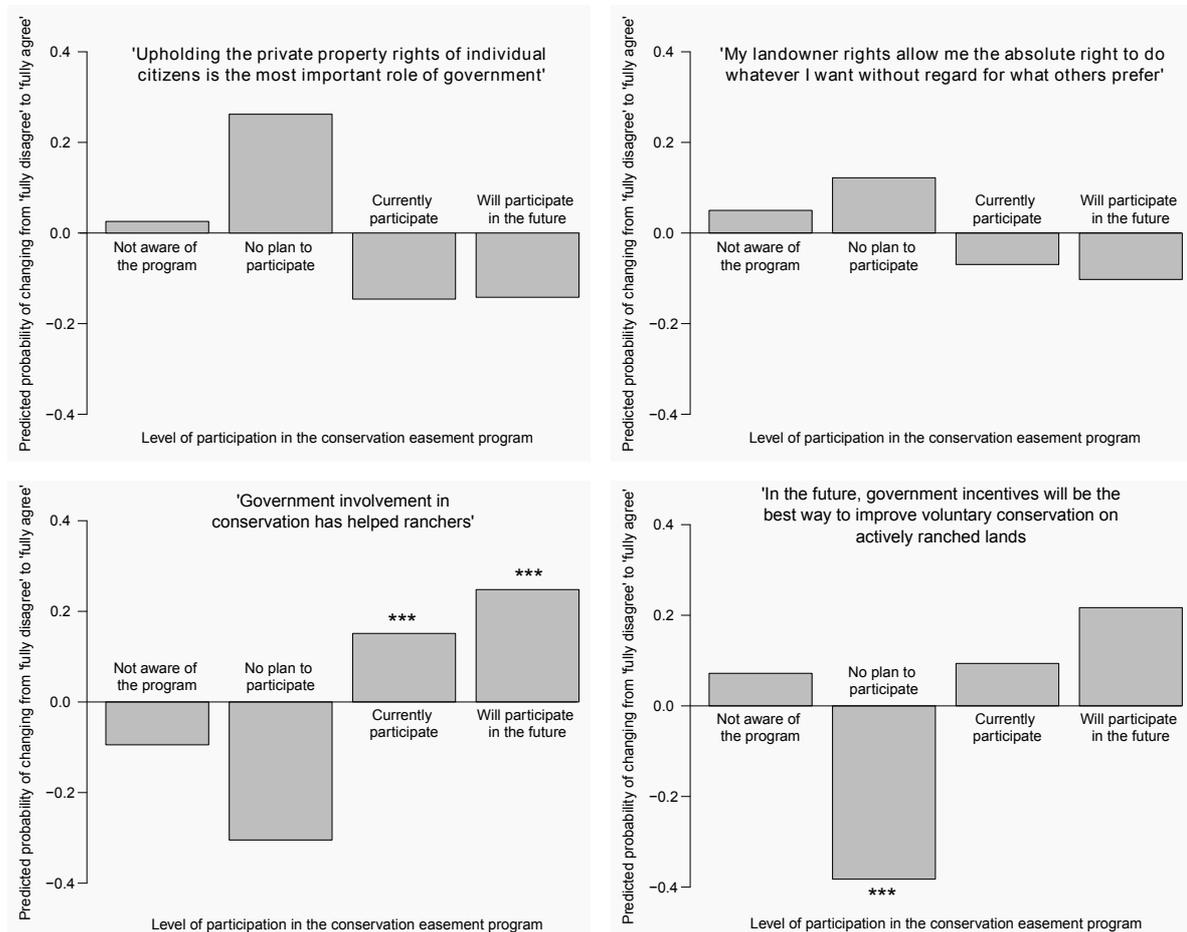
“Private Property” = Upholding the private property rights of individual citizens is the most important role of government

“Landowner rights” = My landowner rights allow me the absolute right to do whatever I want without regard for what others prefer

“Govt Involvement” = Government involvement in conservation has helped ranchers

“Govt Incentives” = In the future, government incentives will be the best way to improve voluntary conservation on actively ranched lands

Figure 3: Estimated changes in probability of different forms of participation in conservation easement programs as a factor of changes in ranchers' levels of agreement with each of the attitude questions. Participation in conservation easements is not significantly related to attitudes towards private property rights. However, participation is related to attitudes towards the government's role in conservation. Significance levels (denoted above or below individual bars): * < 0.05, ** < 0.01, *** < 0.001.



Policy and Management Implications

These findings cast some doubt on the stereotype that a strong property rights orientation is a barrier to conservation easements. Opponents of conservation easements have sometimes argued that they erode private property rights, while supporters have argued that they are a low cost means of maintaining environmental quality on working landscapes. Because conservation easements are a voluntary choice by landowners, there is no philosophical reason that makes participation in easements inconsistent with private choice. Anecdotal discussions with some rangeland policy stakeholders have suggested that ranchers' attitudes about private land and conservation easements have changed over time. On the other hand, views on government continue to be an important aspect of conservation easement decisions because partnerships between government agencies and non-profits are a key mechanism for developing easement programs. Hence, conservation easement stakeholders should spend less energy worrying about views on property rights, and more energy developing trusting relationships between government, non-profit partners, and landowners.

Future Research Directions

This policy brief focused on how attitudes towards private property rights and the role of government in conservation are related to ranchers' likelihood to participate in the conservation easement program. We will continue to investigate relationships between levels of conservation easement participation and other factors, such as demographics (for example, number of generations involved in ranching) and the goals that ranchers pursue through management decision making (such as livestock production, recreation opportunities, or improving soil

quality, among others). Moving beyond questions related to conservation easements, we will focus on identifying the factors that reflect the integration of ecosystem services into rangeland management goals and practices. These investigations will allow us to develop a framework for adaptive rangeland decision-making, which we will test in a long-term experimental study on management styles and ecological dynamics.

Please visit http://rangelandwatersheds.ucdavis.edu/main/grazing_services.htm for additional information.

Christensen, J., J. Rempel and J. Burr. "Land trusts thrive despite, and because of, the Great Recession." High Country News. December 2012. Accessed on 2/17/2012 at < <http://www.hcn.org/issues/43.21/land-trusts-thrive-despite-and-because-of-the-great-recession> >.