

Livestock

MARKET

Digest

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This dying ground



Who has done a better job?

by Lee Pitts

A Digest Exclusive

If one picture is truly worth a thousand words, here are two pictures and two thousand words why this country should not be "Cattle Free by '93." The picture on the left is of the Carrizo Plains Natural Area, a 180,000 acre preserve that used to be a stretch of short grass country between San Luis Obispo and Bakersfield, Calif.

Notice I said "used to be." Three years ago, the Nature Conservancy, the BLM and several other agencies started buying up these central valley grasslands to preserve them. This day as we drive along through the preserve on a newly installed paved road, all that is visible for

miles are tumbling tumbleweeds. This land is clearly dying.

The picture on the right is part of yet another ranch just a couple miles down the road that the BLM and the Conservancy have just added to their growing collection. Up until one month ago it was managed by a rancher with a lifelong history of knowing what is best for these Plains.

The howling wind tells the story. Through the private lands ranch the grass sways in the wind. Through the Carrizo Plains Preserve the wind whips the tumbleweeds like a spreading disease . . . killing the country as they roll.

Where are the winners?

Marcus Rudnick remembers

when the madness began. It was in 1988 when the Nature Conservancy bought its first 82,000 acres in the Carrizo Plains area. It was the start of a BLM plan to buy up to 180,000 acres with \$50 million.

The first land was purchased from Oppenheimer Industries for \$14.2 million. The Conservancy put up \$4.6 million of the purchase price; the American taxpayers unknowingly put up \$4 million through the BLM. \$4.6 million was basically borrowed from the taxpayers and Texaco was blackmailed into putting up a million if they wanted to develop a cogeneration plant in the general vicinity. By now it is a familiar scenario as the Conservancy acquires a thousand acres per day.

Sixteen different groups helped

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plan the preserve and Ed Haste, a state BLM director in 1988, said at the time. "The effort to protect the Carrizo Plains by the Nature Conservancy, the BLM and a host of other individual agencies has been one of the finest cooperative efforts I have ever been involved in, and if everything falls into place, everyone will be a winner."

Today as I drive through 40 miles of the Carrizo I am hard pressed to find a single winner. Ranch after ranch has been bought out — the Washburn, the KCL, the American Ranch, the Goodwin, the Van Meter, the Painted Rock, and now the latest . . . the MU.

Squeeze play

Marcus Rudnick can remember driving cattle across the MU as far back as 1936. Buying the ranch in 1950 was a dream come true for him. Consisting of 23,000 deeded acres, 15,000 privately leased acres and 35,000 BLM acres, the ranch ran 2,500 cows and their calves per year and in the good years Marcus supplemented them with as many as 2,500 steers. He remembers one extremely good year when he ran 6,000 steers and had grass left over. This year he thinks the BLM will let him turn out 300 head on the same ground . . . but only from December to March.

"Why is it that city folks can understand that their lawns need to be mowed and fertilized with steer manure, but not our grasslands?" asks Marcus.

Back in 1988 when the BLM and the Conservancy started buying up the Carrizo Plains, Steve McCormick, a director of the Nature Conservancy, said, "I don't think we'll squeeze the ranchers out. The Conservancy won't put pressure on people to sell their property. If they don't want to sell, we won't buy. Where ranchers do want to hang on to their property, the Conservancy works with them." In Rudnick's case, that meant getting the BLM to drastically

reduce the number of cattle he could turn out. Marcus bitterly accuses the Conservancy and the BLM of working in cahoots to force him off the Plains.

But weep no tears for Marcus. In 1983 he sold a three-quarter interest in the MU to a partner, and it was his partner's decision to sell out to the BLM and the Nature Conservancy. Can you blame him; after all, they were offering \$5 million — \$4.4 million put up by the BLM and \$600,000 from the Conservancy. Now Marcus is renting the ranch back from the Conservancy. No, don't feel sorry for the ranchers . . . feel for the land.

Tumbling tumbleweeds

It's a 40-mile trek from one end to the other of the Plains Preserve, and I knew immediately when we entered it. It wasn't the freshly painted sign or the newly paved road that was my first clue . . . it was the size of the tumbleweeds that littered the landscape. Marcus has never seen the weeds so big or so bad.

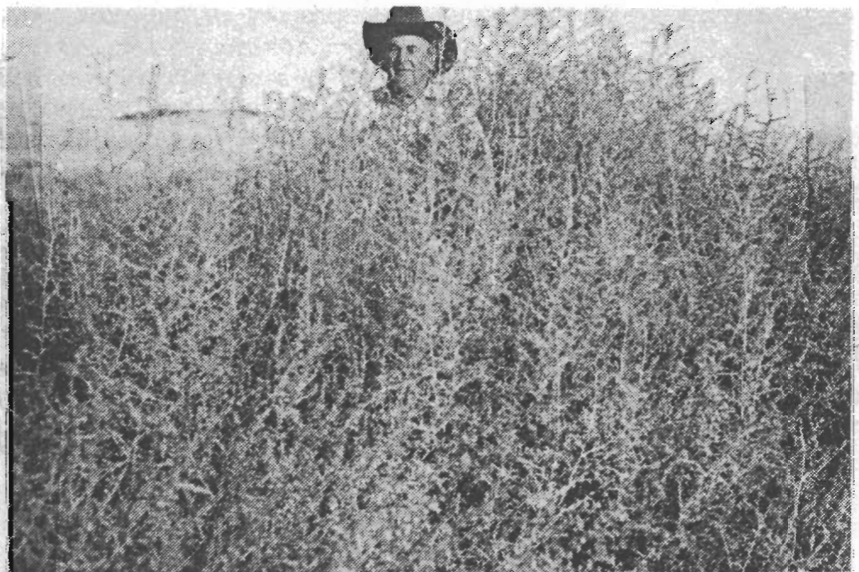
"In all my 60 years of being acquainted with the Carrizo Plains,"

Marcus wrote in a letter to the BLM, "I have never seen such a prolific crop of tumbleweeds and noxious weeds. Your grazing practices and land management have retarded that area for many years to come. In years past," wrote Marcus, "we have grazed the tumbleweeds, as they are high in protein when they are young. This retarded their growth and their very existence. Tumbleweeds and loco weed not only suck the moisture out of the ground, they also crowd out the good grasses and deplete the soil of its nutrients."

The tumbling tumbleweeds are not only destroying the 180,000 acres of the Preserve, they are blowing on to neighboring private lands ranches, scattering seeds as they roll, stopped only by the occasional fence where they pile up until they break down the fence. Then the weeds are free to roll again, spreading leaf hoppers to nearby farm ground.

Rat ranchers

Not only are the BLM and Nature Conservancy growing a bumper crop of weeds and noxious plants, they are destroying the



Marcus Rudnick on the Preserve, with tumbleweeds as far as he eye can see. "There's never been a better crop," he says.

