California Rangeland Trust (00:02)

welcome to another episode of Tune Into the Land. I'm your host and CEO of the California Rangeland Trust, Michael Delbar.

At the Rangeland Trust, we're committed to conserving California's working lands through conservation easements. But equally important is the need to raise awareness of and support the ranchers who confront increasing challenges across the industry each day so they can remain as stewards on the land for generations to come.

The beef industry is fundamental in the state's agricultural economy, ranking as one of the top commodities. Yet, despite its significance, the industry faces growing hurdles, from shrinking markets and limited processing options to heavy regulatory burdens and misinformation. All that tests the resilience and ingenuity of our ranching community.

And too often, ranchers feel isolated while navigating these obstacles.

But as interest in strengthening our food systems grow, so does the movement to stand with our ranchers. Across the state and our nation, organizations are rallying behind producers to address these issues, working side by side with ranchers and policymakers to create effective and lasting change.

Together, they're helping to foster a new age of ranching where stewardship and sustainability are the forefront of operations, ensuring that the land and livelihoods we depend on continue to thrive.

One such organization is Roots of Change, which works to connect producers, policymakers, and advocates to strengthen California's food systems.

Their efforts help bridge the gap between those who care for the land and those shaping the policies that impact it, fostering collaboration that benefits both people and the environment. To help us explore these ideas, we're joined by Michael Dimock, president of Roots of Change. Michael has an extensive background in working at the intersection of food, policy, and sustainability. His time at Roots of Change has been instrumental in creating relationships and conversations that are shaping a more resilient food system.

Today he shares his insight on the challenges facing California's ranchers and ways to address these going forward. With that, I'm excited to bring you my conversation with Michael

Michael Delbar (02:09)

So with that, it's my honor to welcome Michael Dimock to the podcast today. Michael, how are you this afternoon?

Michael Dimock (02:15)

I'm great, Michael. I'm really happy to see the rain we're having. You know, over an inch the last 24 hours, so it's really nice here in the North Coast to get that.

Michael Delbar (02:25)

It is, and we're getting some snowpack in the mountains too, so very good. Why don't you start off by telling us a little bit about you. Who's Michael Dimock?

Michael Dimock (02:27)

Yes, yes.

Yeah, well, I'm the executive director of Roots of Change. been in this job since 2006 and came here kind of a strange route. I mean, in one sense. Although as a child, I worked on my cousin's cattle ranch during the roundups in the backside of Mount Hamilton in the Isabelle Valley, in a beautiful ranch, 12,000 acre ranch, a lot of lakes and ponds and...

We hunted and worked the roundups, moved cattle, things like that. As a kid, I would get up there and loved every minute of it. But grew up in the city. My dad was a dentist, grew up in San Jose. When I was a kid, we were all surrounded by orchards. By the time I was out of high school, the orchards were gone. And I wanted a different route. I went to Southern California for undergrad, and then I went back east for graduate school, and thought I was going to work in Soviet American relations, to be honest. I thought I was going be an arms control negotiator.

But that didn't work out. I kind of realized after the first semester or two, actually about the first year of grad school, that was not my interest. ⁓ But I was interested in change. I ended up doing my kind of work on the change that Gorbachev was bringing to Russia and then worked for the news networks. And that got me into a different world and ⁓ learned a lot about how the media works and then ended up coming back to California.

when the job I thought I was going to get back east didn't pan out and really flailed. But because I spoke Russian, I got hired by an agribusiness company out of the Central Valley based in Sanger called Riverbend. Doesn't exist anymore, but it ⁓ was all about ⁓ citrus concentrates and tomato paste. And they ended up sending me to Europe. And my job was to sell tomato paste. McDonald's was our largest client. I travel all over Europe. And I really started to see

what the Europeans were doing around food systems and it became very interesting to me. So I came back to the United States. Soon after that, I ended up creating ⁓ a company called ⁓ Ag Innovations Network, which was all about bringing people together to ⁓ work together on ⁓ resolving conflict between farmers and environmentalists or farmers and labor, and then ⁓ developing marketing programs. And ⁓ we developed a program in Ventura that was all about ⁓

bringing farmers, activists together on the future of ag. How can we keep agriculture viable in Ventura County? We did a program called the Ag Futures Alliance, which was very successful and the Roots of Change Fund, this is back in 2004, funded me to take that across the state, which we did, and then after two years they hired me as the executive director. So I've been there since 2006, and it's been exciting. We're all about trying to make change in the food system.

Michael Delbar (05:25)

So you get to use those negotiating skills after all.

Michael Dimock (05:27)

That's exactly right. That's what I learned. ⁓ It was really useful to study a book. My favorite thing was to study a book called Getting to Yes, which is all about how you get people out of conflict and into alignment.

Michael Delbar (05:41)

So tell us a little bit about what roots of change does.

Michael Dimock (05:44)

Yeah, Roots of Change was created by a group of foundations back in 2002, actually. And their goal was to just make the system more healthy and resilient. Roots of Change was initially a report that was developed in 2002 that was all about the challenges having to do with the environment, public health, and small farms, what the struggle was. And so their goal was to create

investments, that is philanthropic investments in programs that would deal with those challenges, make the system more healthy, know, less toxins, more environmental work, ⁓ more opportunities for ⁓ farm workers so that they could advance in their careers and ⁓ face ⁓ less challenges, and then public health, how to just get the population healthier and farm economies.

They started making investments. They love that project we did down in Ventura that brought people together to work together toward the future of Ventura County. We got the farm workers, the ag organizations and the environmental advocates to actually work together to change a law at the state level. And ⁓ that became of real interest to them. And they like that idea of catalyzing change. So that's been the focus. What we do is we start things that are kind of innovative or trying to

make some positive impact on agriculture and after a few years usually around five years we'll hand that off to an organization that wants to just run something. We just like to be a catalyst for change.

Michael Delbar (07:23)

And that's kind of what you're taking on in regard to the meat systems in California.

Michael Dimock (07:29)

That's correct. Yeah, we've been real interested in meat. Maybe going back to my childhood working on my cousin's cattle ranch, was so, I don't know, I really loved it. I loved the interaction between the animals and the humans. I loved being on the land in beautiful places where there was lots of nature. And so it was a great opportunity to get back into that in 2019, right before the pandemic, we started looking at what we could do.

to improve the situation for California producers.

California Rangeland Trust (08:03)

I mean, part of that collaboration is between ranchers themselves, organizations, policymakers, researchers. Some of that all came together recently in Sacramento with the Terra Madre. So Michael, tell us a little bit more about that event.

Michael Dimock (08:17)

Yeah, so Terra Madre ⁓ is a festival that ⁓ the Slow Food Movement, which began in Italy in the 1980s, ⁓ developed ⁓ to promote the small and mid-sized producers globally who are producing what they call good, clean, and fair food. That is, food that's high quality, good, that's clean, it doesn't have toxins, it's raised or produced in a way that's good for the environment, and fair.

which is really about the producer getting a fair amount of money for the hard work they're doing. So good, clean and fair food is food that the Slow Food Movement is trying to promote. And so ⁓ early on in the early 80s, they were doing a project that was all about what are the endangered products of the world? They created a huge list and found farmers that would grow those or produce those livestock ⁓ species or grow those different plants and fruits and vegetables.

⁓ And then they created something called the Presidia Project, which comes from the Latin word for wall of defense. And these Presidia Projects were all about building markets for those endangered products. So it was going beyond just making a list and getting people to grow it, but then to actually create marketplaces. In Northern California here, we did a Presidia Project around heritage turkeys and have built a big program for the raising of turkeys.

here in the North Coast and then also around the Gravenstein apple and the Petaluma ⁓ red potato. They're different products, the Blenheim apricot. There have been products, there have been many different species of ⁓ sheep and cattle, Criollo cattle have been protected by Slow Food and more and more producers are producing these different species. So ⁓ they were all about doing that kind of work. In 2004, when I was actually chairman of the board for Slow Food in the US, we put on an event.

called Terra Madre and we brought 5,000 small producers from all around the world. We hired jets to go to Africa, Latin America, Russia, Northern Europe and we flew in 5,000 small producers. I personally worked on bringing 70 ranchers from the United States who came to this event. And so one of my most incredible memories is Masai warriors who raised cattle

in Kenya with their spears meeting ranchers from the Midwest. It was an incredible moment and they were sharing, the translators sharing information about how they raised their cattle. It was an incredible thing. It blew my mind. And so ⁓ this went on from 2004 until last year in Italy every other year. But the Italians decided, wow, we have to do this more often and we need to do it in different places. So

⁓ As you know, Patrick Mulvaney from Mulvaney's Biennale in Sacramento was an instrumental, he was a catalyst in getting that event brought to Sacramento, which is the farm before capital of the United States, self-declared, but I believe it's true. And so ⁓ now it's going to happen in the years that it's not happening in Italy, it's going to happen here in Sacramento, California. And we saw just less than a month ago, three weeks ago,

In Sacramento, 160,000 people came to that event, proving that the idea of a Terra Madre Americas, where we bring producers from Argentina into Canada and all across the United States, all through Latin America, come together. 22 Latin American countries came. It was fantastic. There were 30 states represented. There were producers from across the country. It was a fantastic event. ⁓ There was coffee. There was wine.

There was ⁓ different kinds of spirits. were vegetables. UC put together an incredible farmers market and the farmers were solid, small farmers were selling vegetables all weekend long. It was an incredible thing. And yeah, I was just so happy to be there. It brought joy to my heart.

Michael Delbar (12:20)

We actually talked about the Slow Food Movement before on one of our podcasts where we had Patrick and Bob and Mulvaney and that was season three, episode 10. So we kind of got a preview of what was coming up.

Michael Dimock (12:29)

Wow.

He sure did. They were the catalyst. Yeah, good for you. I'm glad. Yeah, they're great partners for us in this meat work. have, as you know, lot of events at their place.

California Rangeland Trust (12:43)

So know Roots of Change hosted the Slow Meat Pavilion at Terra Madre. So how was that part of the event and was that successful?

Michael Dimock (12:50)

⁓ I'll just say at the top line, it was incredible, way more successful than we thought. 160,000 people came to the event, which totally blew us away. We thought it was going to be like 100,000 if we were lucky. ⁓ But it was way more than that. ⁓ And we did, as you said, slow, we put together a pavilion, 50 by 50 foot space that had a demo kitchen and a podcast ⁓ stage. ⁓

The goal was really to lift up the really good work that California ranches that are working on this concept of regenerative production ⁓ are doing. So we had 15 producers who came and had tables where they could sell product or engage the public in conversation. We did six cooking demos, three butchery demos, and the demos weren't just the chef or the butcher. They were in conversation with the producer of the meat that was being

utilized for the demo or for the butchery. And so it was a really neat set of dialogues. And then we did these nine different podcasts. And some of it was about what are the health benefits of regenerative meat? There's a lot of data now about grass-finished animals the diversity of plants that they're eating and what that does to the phytonutrient content of meat. ⁓

We had some great talks by the leading experts in the country on that. We did a lot on the environmental work. We did a lot on the market developments, direct marketing of these different brands. It was really exciting and the crowds were amazing. mean, it was lots of people watching what we were doing. was one of the most popular spots in this much larger event that was dedicated to the concept of good, clean and fair food, which is the moniker of slow food, the slow food movement, which is a national, international movement.

Michael Delbar (14:41)

That is pretty impressive. 160,000 people.

Michael Dimock (14:44)

Yeah, was really, I was so excited. I Mariposa Ranch was there, lot of different, the Richard's regenerative, ⁓ some ⁓ poultry producers were there, ⁓ and everybody was selling out a product. ⁓ It was really exciting. It was really exciting to see the public's engagement and interest in meat. You hear all this anti-meat talk on the radio or on TV and the press, and man.

People are interested in good meat, no question.

Michael Delbar (15:15)

Well, that's good because as an industry, we face that challenge. Folks that think cows are killing the planet and we've got to quit eating meat because we need to save the planet and that's going to do it, which is total baloney. And we know that, you know that. It's how do we get those folks that are easily swayed by the misinformation and let them understand that no, grazing is an important tool.

Michael Dimock (15:30)

No.

Michael Delbar (15:45)

with, we take that away from the, from the equation, it's actually more detrimental to, the environment. So that's in an industry that's struggling to, to keep going, whether those struggles are land access, misinformation, policy decisions being made by folks that are generations removed from the, from the farm or ranch, regulations.

Just the general misunderstanding of what it takes to manage an environment is a big hurdle. And what Rangeland Trust does is help try to keep those ranchers on that land, keep those ranchers ranching. And in order to do that, we have to have the land and they have to be able to stay in business. So one of those challenges that we see and as a producer, our family is a producer as well.

is into the direct-to-consumer markets is how do we provide opportunity for ranchers to enter that direct-to-consumer market? Finding those outlets that are inspected, USDA or even California inspected facilities so that we can sell to that restaurant or to the farmers market, however we're doing that, that's a big challenge. If we have opportunities like that,

That's another tool to keep ranchers going. So where do you see those challenges in? I know Roots of Change has, and you've been focused on this now for several years. How are we doing on that front?

Michael Dimock (17:13)

Yeah.

Yeah, thank you for saying that because that's really how our work began. We began looking at the processing challenge. And so this is the context of when the pandemic hit and the big meat processing plants in the Midwest shut down. What happened is ⁓ the big producers in the country had to

shift their processing. So all the small plants around the country got completely filled up and the small and mid-sized producers, a lot of them got pushed out. So we were looking at capacity. We need more capacity. We need redundancy in the system so that there's enough capacity in a moment like that so that everybody can get their meat processed, their animals processed into the marketplace. Because prior to that, there was real building of this ⁓ more direct

marketing of high quality meat from local areas. People are interested in local food. So this was a big challenge and we started looking at this and we looked at how do we get more processing and we saw all the challenges. Local ordinances that mess up the way plants can get their water processed coming out, the wastewater from these plants. That's a real hassle because it's all done locally. The state can't do that much, the Fed can't do that much, so there's a real impediment there.

Then there's the challenge of making these plants upgraded and efficient over time. Really hard to get that done. There's not enough focus then. There's the cost of USDA inspection. You have to pay for the inspectors to be in the plant. So there were all these challenges that we were looking at. And so one of the things that we saw that was positive is that the administration at that time put money into helping provide grants to get new plants built.

And there have been lots of upgrades and new plants that have been started ⁓ across the country and a few here in California, upgrades mostly, but one new plant actually up in North Sacramento Valley and the foothills, they're putting a new plant in, which is really important. We need that plant. So we were looking at those issues. ⁓ The pandemic, know, demand for local meat went way up, which was really good for a lot of ranchers. ⁓ And so we started thinking about

Okay, good. Now this problem is getting, you people are starting to see some change in this area. Not nearly enough. We need more support for local processing. ⁓ But then the issue became the market. How do we get more people into the market? So we spent a lot of time, as you know, and you were part of it, you were one of our expert speakers at some of our events, where we brought producers together to share information about

the marketing systems that existed, about the regulations, tried to bring processors into the conversation, which we did. We started to a supply chain, ⁓ expand a supply chain of local regenerative meat to the University of California, which is now well on its way. Six campuses now instead of one. ⁓ Hospital systems in the UC system are starting to buy this meat because they want this grass-fed meat for their patients. So it's been very successful in that sense.

But then we had two big grants from the USDA that got canned, they were doged. So we're like, ⁓ our program for building markets has now crashed. What are we gonna do? And that brought us to the big Slow Food event. It was a way for us to extend the work and build ⁓ public attention and public connection to brands in the state of California and actually nationally. So ⁓ what do I think? I think that there's a lot of work to be done. Right now prices are really good.

for beef producers. So a lot of them have kind of backed off local sales because the sales of cow-calf operations are really high. The prices are so great, people are making a ton of money. That's not gonna last. We know that. The market goes up and down. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Couple more years, I think you're right. I think people deserve that because there were many tough years. But in these years of...

Michael Delbar (21:23)

We like to think and stick it out a little longer. We're okay with that.

Michael Dimock (21:36)

robust sales and robust prices. Let us really think about the long term. How do we build more local markets? So we're really focused on that piece of it now.

Michael Delbar (21:47)

2024, cattle and calves ranked number four in California with almost $5 billion of market value. Grapes were number three, I believe, or number two. The gamins were two, grapes were three. In the grape market, and the cattle market, you may see a flip there. You may see cattle and calves

Michael Dimock (22:00)

Mm-hmm.

Michael Delbar (22:10)

going up the chain here in terms of market value for the state. Getting folks in the policy making realm to understand how valuable cattle and calves are to the state's economy is a huge issue alone, much less the value to our local communities, the ranchers and those who, know, the businesses that they support. keeping the, again, keeping these ranchers ranching is a key goal I know of.

Roots of Change and you and Rangeland Trust. Do you feel that we've hit enough of the processing? Okay.

Michael Dimock (22:43)

Yes. No, no,

I think I think there needs to be upgrades and more expansion of processing, and I think it needs to be regional.

⁓ I think it would be really nice for us to have more processing capacity in the state of California. Now right now we have this, because cow-calf prices are so high, just for cow-calf producers, the prices are so high, a lot of cattle are leaving and not being processed here. So there's actually excess capacity in the state right now in some of the plants, which is not good because the labor is lost. People look for other jobs because they're not getting employed. That's a problem. So we need more training.

for people in the state of California to learn how to process the animals and to be good at ⁓ breaking the animals for the different markets. So that's an issue we have to look at. The JCs, the junior colleges, the California local community college system is really a great place for that training to take place. ⁓ We need more capacity. There are people working on that up and down the state. But I want to go back to what you said about policy.

So we worked with the California Cattlemen this year to co-sponsor a bill 411, which is the bill that allows ranchers to compost their animals, the animals that die on their ranches. There's been limits to that that have been very costly and caused ranchers to have to do it kind of under the radar. You don't want them to have to do that because that's a risk for them. So we worked with the cattlemen to allow for a lot more composting on ranch of animals.

due to fires, disease outbreaks, ⁓ animals, ⁓ predation. There are all kinds of things. We have wolves now coming in. So we need to be able to quickly take care of these animals that are killed. And one way to do that is to compost them. So we worked with the cattlemen. We got that passed. The governor signed the bill yesterday. Really happy that happened. We want to work more with the cattlemen. We also want to work with the lamb producers in the state of California, because

There's a lot of sheep raised in this state as well. Some people raise both cattle and sheep. ⁓ And they both have their place on the range. They're needed. Those animals are needed. You see what's happening now with the use of sheep ⁓ in vineyards. It's fantastic in goats and sheep to mitigate ⁓ fire fuel. Cattle are really great at that too. Even poultry is good for that. So there's a lot that can be done with the state of California.

to extend its appreciation and utilization of cattlemen, shepherds, and those who are raising livestock to help us deal with this climate change issue that's going on. And California is a leader in this area. So we look to the cattlemen, look to ⁓ Farm Bureau and others to work with us on these issues and to you guys, because you have touched so many ranches up and down the state of California. You've saved so much land and I know you want to save a lot more.

and we'd love to help you do that.

Michael Delbar (25:51)

420,000 acres permanently protected, but you're right. There's a long way to go. We've got another 300,000 acres in the queue.

Michael Dimock (25:59)

Yeah, yeah, you need the funding for that. And I know we got some from Prop 4 that we worked on. We were a sponsor of Prop 4, which passed last year, a $10 billion fund, $1 billion into the kinds of systems that we'd like to see. And we know that the Department of Natural Resources, the agency for the state of California, got money to provide that can go to ranchers and preservation of land. I saw you speak on that recently.

Michael Delbar (26:02)

need to find it for that.

Yeah, the challenge with that though is convincing despite all the things that you and I have just talked about and how important it is and is convincing the policymakers to put the money where their support is. We've got the state set a 30 by 30 goal. 30 % of its land, 30 % of its state water is conserved by 2030. That's coming up here pretty quick. Yet, the state's four million acres short.

Michael Dimock (26:44)

Mm-hmm.

Yeah.

Michael Delbar (26:55)

When our funding

agencies with those funds are only putting 3 % or 5 % of their funds available into conservation easements, we've got some work to do. We've got to get that number up there in percent.

Michael Dimock (27:10)

I agree.

Should be at least double, maybe triple. So let's work together on that next year.

Michael Delbar (27:13)

at

⁓ we'd love that circling back real quick here. You know, we've talked about the processing facilities and that is, those are, that capacity is great, but if it's got to be in the state, size of California, it's got to be regional. We've got to have facilities that aren't a three hour drive for a producer. There's not enough margin in that, in that meat product to warrant a three hour drive to take the animal for harvest.

Michael Dimock (27:37)

Right.

Michael Delbar (27:46)

and then three hours back and three hours back to get the finished product. Now that's a challenge that we have. ⁓ The USDA inspection and getting the inspectors is a bit of a challenge as well. But tell us a little bit about what the CDFA, California Department of Food and Ag inspection process is. I know it's not active right now for budget reasons, but how can that

Michael Dimock (27:52)

Huge.

Michael Delbar (28:14)

process if it was reinvigorated and funded, how can that help out?

Michael Dimock (28:19)

Well, if the state of California would do like some of the other states have done, to make our system equivalent to the federal system, we would not need ⁓ USDA, so many USDA plants. We could convert a lot of the plants that we have in the state that are state licensed plants to make products available for sale in the state. If we want even farther, you can actually go farther than that. The state system could even

advance to a level of ⁓ specificity in terms of ⁓ inspection that we could actually go out of the state. But I don't even think we need that. I think what we need is a system that allows us to ⁓ regionally process animals and sell them in the markets regionally. There's enough demand. The Bay Area, the Sacramento area, the LA area, the Fresno area, those are big areas.

lots of consumers, millions of consumers, and that's what you need. Because not all the ranchers in the state of California are to move in this direction. ⁓ But many of them will if there's opportunity, and part of that opportunity, as you're pointing out, needs to be the opportunity to get an animal processed or a set of animals processed and then sold ⁓ not before the kill, not before the slaughter, but sold after the slaughter through retail channels. ⁓

know, butcher shops, grocery stores, restaurants, hotels, all of that. Now it all has to be USDA. That's really cumbersome. ⁓ So ⁓ we have advocated, we've been told by CDFA it's a budget issue. So this is a battle that could be fought if we had enough allies. That is, if we could align a bunch of advocacy organizations like Roots of Change, who want to see more local food systems, with the cattlemen, with the Farm Bureau.

⁓ We could probably make some headway on that, but we need to build a big coalition. You want to work on that?

Michael Delbar (30:20)

Absolutely.

Because I think those are the right markets, as you mentioned. A lot of these producers aren't looking to sell nationally or so. They're trying to meet the local demand. it takes a lot to cut and wrap a loan as $1.50 and up per pound. And your harvest fees, a couple hundred, two or three hundred bucks on top of that, despite the high price of the commodity, that whittles around.

widows away at your profit margin, substantial. So having, if you can cut down that transportation, not only does it make sense to not have to drive three hours, or six or nine hours just to take your product, but if you can do that locally, you're providing local jobs, you're providing that economic value in all these different regions. And bottom line is you're trying, you're keeping these ranchers profitable and keeping them on the land.

Michael Dimock (30:52)

That's right.

Mm-hmm.

Yep, yep, it has to happen. one of the things that we could work on is actually, part of it is that people have legislators, government agencies, ⁓ the change comes about when they see enough people who are kind of unusual partners, let's say.

people that let's say are more conservative and more progressive working together, that gets their attention. Like, hey, there's alignment on this, there's consensus, there's a majority in this state that wanna see this happen. I think that's what we need to do and then we need to give them a picture of what we want. So it'd be really nice for us now to kind of create a map. Here's where the different ⁓ processing facilities need to be, where they need to be and this is the capacities they need to have in order to.

⁓ actually have enough capacity to feed the markets that we see are out there. I think that would be quite helpful in making the case because it's going to cost money, the state's going to have to dedicate money, but you know CDFA, of all the state departments, they get the least amount of money from the state's general fund. Most of CDFA's money comes from fees that farmers or businesses pay that are associated with agriculture,

or from the federal government. We know the federal government's cutting back in a very large way, so we're gonna have to look to the state more. So we have to make the argument that people want healthy food. We saw it, ⁓ 160,000 people came to that event, 160,000. And that tells you something, there is real demand. And so we just need to make that clear to people.

Michael Delbar (32:55)

And where does California rank in agriculture production in the United States? Right at the top. Number one, well, we have a wonderful CDFA administration. Secretary Ross and her team are great and they really want to do so much, but it comes down to the budget. And where is the legislature in terms of making agriculture and CDFA a priority?

Michael Dimock (33:02)

Number one.

All right, thumbs down.

That's right. I totally agree with you. ⁓ Karen Ross has been a great secretary. The department has been a real ally. Well, I think she's been there almost 14 years, right? I mean, it's an incredible amount of work has been done in all these years. And that really do help ranchers. We have the Healthy Soils Program. We have the Water Efficiency Program. We have the Farmland ⁓ Protection Program. ⁓ And now we have this ⁓

program to promote ⁓ school food. And school food is now one of the purchasers of local meats and regenerative meats. So there's a lot going on and we just need to keep that momentum up.

Michael Delbar (34:04)

You mentioned regenerative ranching. Some of us look at sustainable ranching, but sustainable and regenerative kind of become buzzwords. Where do you see?

What do you see as the major factors that drive sustainability in the ranching business?

Michael Dimock (34:22)

Yeah, obviously to me it has, there are three big pieces for me. One is that the way that you're using animals is building soil and the diversity of the plants within the pasture. That is really diverse pasture. We know that creates healthier meat, it creates, it's really good for the soil. get, ⁓ the healthier the soil is, the better your pastures are gonna be. So that's really important. The second is species diversity, not in plants.

So what are we doing to enhance the species diversity of the critters, the birds, ⁓ reptiles, the mammals? What are we doing to enhance diversity? That's part of 30 by 30. That's part of what the state's trying to do is bring more biodiversity. So what are we doing in that area? What is a ranch doing to support that? That can be a...

somewhat of a challenge when it comes to predation. We had a whole session on that at Terra Madre, a really great session with two ranchers from Montana who are very committed to working with predators and making it happen that their ranches can be successful, but also live with predators. It's a real challenge and it's increasingly a challenge here in California now that we have wolves, but we also have coyotes, we have wild dogs, we have all kinds of challenges in that area. So there's a lot more that needs to be done there in terms of helping ranchers.

to deal with that biodiversity of predators issue. ⁓ But then the waters, what are we doing to protect our waters? Because ⁓ The great thing about ranchers, one of the reasons I so love agriculture is our farmers and ranchers are the first line of stewardship of the natural world. They have the most intimate relationship with nature. And by intimate, I mean ⁓ it's a place where there's the most risk.

between the land and between the ranching operation and the farm. They have to be in sync working together for the long term to make sure that that operation can continue to be healthy because the land is healthy. So if a rancher or a farmer is thinking along those lines, trying to minimize the negative impacts ⁓ of toxics or whatever it is, whatever the actions is, if they're trying to take action that is enhancing the ability of land,

to regenerate its health, its fecundity, the thing that allows it to keep producing good stuff for us humans in terms of oxygen, water, and food, then in my mind, they are sustainable, they are regenerative, and organic is a different thing because that says you can't use something. yeah, even organic. ⁓

A lot of producers now who are on this regenerative or the sustainable world end up going in some part of their operation organic because it's not that big a jump.

Michael Delbar (37:14)

You know that we do a lot of mitigation easements that are required as a result of an impact at some sort of development or conversion is occurring. The fact that livestock grazing is critical to the sustainability of the species, whether that's red-legged frogs or California tiger salamanders or Swainson's hawk or you name it, those species, the health of those species and their environment depends on grazing.

So there is that relationship between sustainability and grazing in these livestock on the land. And that's a critical part of it. Where do you see going forward, there's a lot of changes in technology that is the next generation embraces probably a little better than

Michael Dimock (37:44)

Yes.

Yeah, it's essential.

Michael Delbar (38:14)

some of the older generations do, just as a matter of fact, you know, and, and, you know, grandpa did it one way, but, you know, grandson's going to do it a different. And, and when you're, when the granddaughter comes back from college, it says, Hey, we've got this new technology I want to implement. Where do you see technological changes in regard to sustainable management or in, and the stewardship that are, it's being provided out?

Michael Dimock (38:19)

Yeah.

Yeah, I'm all about science. ⁓ I think science is so important. The thing that, and technology comes from science. So the thing that really excites me, there are a few areas of technology. One of them is the sensors.

the ability to actually see. If you're managing a big piece of land, it's very hard to see everything every day. So this development of all kinds of different sensors about ⁓ when an area needs water or if there's a pest invasion or ⁓ when it needs some kind of fertilization. mean, those kinds of things are really important. And so the sensors that are being developed.

including the ability to use drones to see what's happening. I think that's all fabulous stuff. Another thing that really excites me are these collars that create fencing without actual fencing because one of the things that you realize, first thing you learn if you start looking at ranches is how expensive fencing can be and when we have lots of fires those fences get burned and you have to rebuild them and that's a huge cost. So these

these collars that allow you to control the movement of animals. I've talked to lots of ranchers. I was in Montana in June at my cousin's ranch down in southern Montana in Red Lodge, and he had just adopted collars. And we were watching how those animals were moving as a consequence of them, and it was quite positive. I think, and that technology is getting better all the time. So those are a couple of things I think are really exciting. Sensors, the collars. ⁓

You know, you and I heard a talk the other day with a rancher who's using AI to kind of determine where he should be going with his markets, what kinds of technologies he should be thinking about, how he should be managing his animals based on the data that's flowing back to him. So there's a lot of different things that I think are out there unavailable. ⁓ But in the end, those are just tools. There are two big things that in addition to the technologies I think about, one is the relationships.

One other thing that I saw at Terra Madre and through the work we did with you and other ranchers over the last couple of years when we were holding our all-day seminars and events is the relationship between the producers, the processors, and the market makers. Those relationships are really important. The problem we have in our country today in terms of many different products, but certainly meet, is there are too few companies that basically control the market and they hold all the relationships.

And that really puts the producers at a disadvantage. So that's why we're such advocates of more direct marketing relationships. It doesn't have to be direct like a farmer's market. It could be direct to the University of California, which is a wholesale buyer, or it could be to a market chain. But we need our ranchers to be in relationship to the marketplace and to the producers and not giving all that power away to three big companies that control 88 % of the market for meat in this nation.

Michael Delbar (41:50)

So just to clarify, when the rancher was talking about AI and that was artificial intelligence, as opposed to the normal conversation with the rancher and talks about AI is something completely different.

Michael Dimock (41:58)

Right.

You're

right! That's right, you're right! Artificial insemination, sorry! Yeah, thanks for clarifying.

Michael Delbar (42:10)

So what do you see coming up in terms of the future in regard to the changes or actions that Roots of Change has had, any successes that you've had, or opportunities on the horizon? Where are we going?

Michael Dimock (42:25)

Yeah, thanks

for asking. there are a couple things. One, obviously the Terra Madre event is going to happen in the years it's not happening in Italy, where it's always been happening since 2004. It was every other year in Italy. Now every other year it's going to happen in Sacramento. So in 2027 it's going to happen again. So we're going to be doing our level best to make it even bigger.

We have some really big ideas about what we might do in 2027. But in the interim, we would like to do ⁓ kind of mini events. We'd like to do something in LA. Let's say, let's call it a slow meat event, not a Terra Madre Americas event, but a slow meat event. It's just focused on meat. So we do an event, let's say a day somewhere at a venue where we invite and we get 10,000 people to come and we do a similar thing on a smaller scale in LA. Let's do it in the Bay area. Let's do it in Fresno.

We're thinking about doing it in Colorado because we do have relationships with ranchers in the Rockies ⁓ and we think that that could be really good. We're also really, so continuing to do outreach to educate the public on the quality of the meat, the value of the meat, the importance of making these relationships between producers at the local level and local markets.

But then the other thing we're really interested in is byproducts. So one of the projects that we worked on that got doged but may be coming back to life is the development of markets for byproducts. Primarily we're talking about ⁓ the skins, the leather that comes off the animal ⁓ that right now many ranchers have to pay to have it put in the landfill when they have their animal killed. They don't get any money back for that. We're working with a group called the Other Half Processing.

out of Minnesota which buys these ⁓ hides from ranchers who are doing regenerative practices and they sell them to European fashion companies and American fashion companies that want to tell the stories about the sources of those hides. ⁓ but they're also doing ⁓ collagen, they're doing animal, I mean, pet food products. ⁓

and all about the stories of the source ranches. So we're going to be working on that. It looks like USDA might be funding that again. So we'll be working on that. That's a national project for beef and bison. ⁓ But we also, like I said, want to do some promotion of lamb. You know, there should be, there should be like ⁓ more focus at the state level on our producers of livestock. And we have to figure out ways to get that done through, through. ⁓

things that the legislature can do, what cities and counties can do, and then what the market makers can do, that is the retailers, the wholesale buyers. So we're really thinking about that. We'd love to partner with you in thinking about that with anyone who's interested in that because we've got to figure out more ways.

Michael Delbar (45:26)

The meat side of the business is great and all those things that go with it, when you talk about the byproducts. But it comes down to you've got to have the rancher producing it. And that rancher has to have a place to produce. And that's the land. So that's the underlying theme that we all need to remember. And that's the theme and the message that we need to convince, hopefully jointly, to those policy makers that the number one ag state

Michael Dimock (45:38)

Mm-hmm.

Michael Delbar (45:55)

in the United States of America, it needs to be reflected in its policies. And that's not always the case.

Michael Dimock (46:01)

Absolutely.

Right. Yeah, it's expensive to be a producer in this state. ⁓ We have a lot of regulation, it's true. ⁓ I'd like to see a lot more work at the state level between agencies on how to get those to be smart policies, more efficient policies, where it's less

that was why we did the composting bill ⁓ because ⁓ it's a much more economically advantageous to producers to be able to do that than have animals hauled off or take it to a dump or whatever. ⁓ So, you know, those kinds of things and we're very open to hearing from you and your ranching constituents about what they'd like to see done. ⁓

our policy advisor Matthew Marsom is really eager to work on this stuff. So if you can come to us with ideas, we're happy to pursue and investigate and see if we can get something done. ⁓ Yeah, it's expensive to ranch here. Land's expensive, water's expensive, energy's expensive, markets are expensive to get into. It's an expensive state, but it's also the third largest economy in the world. it's, you know, we're in this weird ⁓ place where you have

kind of the good and the bad together.

Michael Delbar (47:14)

So what advice do you have for that next generation that wants to get into this challenging environment in ranching or even just ag production, especially those that don't come from an ag background? ⁓ It's tough even if you do have that, but if you don't, it's even harder.

Michael Dimock (47:31)

I agree, it is, but I'll say, I think...

There are two places in this world, if I was 18 and I was thinking about where I want to end up working, what career I would want to choose, I would say that food systems and energy and housing are really big issues. Any one of those would be exciting. I would go for agriculture because it is so, mean, civilization is based on agriculture. You don't have agricultural system, you don't have civilization.

With climate change, the challenges in the markets, all the things that we've been talking about, the costs, our food system is more more fragile. We need to fix it. And so it's really important that we get the best minds. I've been excited because we're getting students out of UC Davis, out of Stanford, out of Berkeley, coming to work with us because they see the need for food systems and they love the idea of being part of creating solutions. So I'm in, I'm,

enthused, I'm excited, and I feel hopeful by the number of people I see. And I think a lot of good ideas come from the outside sometimes. Like you were saying, you know, people aren't doing it like their grandfathers did it. Some of the new ideas, some of the really exciting things I've been seeing are from ranchers who were first generation ranchers. ⁓ Mariposa Ranch, ⁓ one of the producers who came to our event, who sold out his product before the day was over. ⁓ He was just, he's a really good example. He didn't grow up on a ranch.

He started, he was interested, he went to Cal Poly, he started working in the ranching world and he's developed a really great business. 20 years he's been in the direct marketing of beef and he's done a fantastic job. So, ⁓ you know, I think it's quite exciting. ⁓ Fresh blood is always good, but I would really like to see a lot of the ranchers, the families that had kids who were ranching, stay in ranching. But they gotta have an opportunity to do it and that's what we're trying to do is make that opportunity.

Michael Delbar (49:27)

And Rangeland Trust is right there as well. Again, if we don't have the land, we don't have the ranchers. And so we're doing what we can do to partner with our landowners to keep them on that land and keep that land available, whether that's for cattle or sheep or whatever it may be. If we lose that land, we've lost the rancher.

Michael Dimock (49:34)

Check.

Yep, that's right. That's right.

Michael Delbar (49:51)

So Michael, thank you for taking the time today to share with our listeners about you and Roots of Change and all the great work that you've been doing, particularly with the ranching community and on the meat side of things. We really appreciate all that work and look forward to working with you some more and looking forward to Terra Madre in 2027 and all the great things that come with that. So thank you for taking time to be with us today.

Michael Dimock (50:16)

Michael, it was a great pleasure. you know, I always enjoy talking to you. I like what you're doing and I like working with you. it was my pleasure. Thank you very much.

Michael Delbar (50:24)

Thank you.

California Rangeland Trust (50:26)

We hope you enjoyed this conversation with Michael Dimock. To learn more about the work that Roots of Change is doing within the agriculture industry, check out rootsofchange.org. That closes the gate on another episode of Tune Into the Land. We want to remind you that your feedback matters to us. So please share your thoughts by leaving a comment or a review. Let us know what you enjoyed, what topics you'd like us to dig into, and your suggestions for future guests.

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