

East Side Story

When people come to Lake Berryessa they usually focus on watersports, hiking, picnicking, or wildlife viewing on the west side of the lake. They usually just admire the sprawling beauty of the East Side and Berryessa Peak from afar. But the "East Side Story" has had its share of drama since before the dam was built and Lake Berryessa created. In many ways it is a smaller version of the popular "Yellowstone" television show: conflicts over private land rights, cattle grazing controversies, government takeovers of private property, environmental issues, and wildfire impacts. The full East Side Story is too broad for this book. The following is condensed history of the highlights.

The Blue Ridge Berryessa Natural Area (BRBNA) Conservation Partnership

The BRBNA was an association of private landowners, public agencies, non-profit groups, businesses, and the general public that collaborated on the conservation and stewardship of the upper Putah Creek and Cache Creek watersheds. This diverse group of advocates sought to protect the region's natural, agricultural, recreational, and historical resources. The organization is no longer active.

One reason for its demise was the controversial proposal by one of its members, Tulyome (<https://www.tuleyome.org>), to expand it into a National Conservation Area (NCA). The BRBNA members, as a consensus-based organization, opposed the NCA and most members opposed the Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument proposal that followed the rejection of the NCA proposal by Congress. (See the report on the creation of the Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument at the end of this book.)

As a voluntary and inclusive organization, the BRBNACP facilitated coordination and collaboration among its public, private, and nonprofit partners; provided research, information, and education services to partners; and conducted outreach to the public. The Blue Ridge Berryessa Natural Area Partnership won the Governor's Award for Excellence in Environmental and Economic Leadership in 2002. The BRBNA partnership was honored as a model for watershed management and was credited with the "conservation, preservation, and management of over 500,000 acres of natural, wild, agricultural and recreational lands."

Five principles guided the activities and decisions of the Partnership: 1) Preserve, protect and enhance natural resource values of the BRBNA including its lands, wildlife, plants, creeks, and waters; 2) Support conservation-based land-use activities and sustainable economic development in the BRBNA; 3) Respect the rights of private landowners; 4) Encourage resource-compatible, non-growth inducing public recreation facilities on public lands; 5) Consider all positions on an issue, but only support activities when the Partnership has reached consensus.

Blue Ridge Berryessa Natural Area

BIG. WILD. UNDISCOVERED.

Lake Berryessa is familiar to many people. But did you know that it is surrounded by the Blue Ridge Berryessa Natural Area (BRBNA), which includes half a million acres of the wildest land in Central California? This beautiful and rugged landscape has two new, federally-designated wilderness areas, 40 miles of state Wild and Scenic River, and is home to bald eagles, bears, tule elk, and mountain lions. For the 7 million people within one hundred miles of the Blue Ridge Berryessa mountains, it's a natural treasure waiting to be found.

AS BIG AS YOSEMITE.
At almost 800,000 acres, the BRBNA is actually a bit larger than the famous national park. From Mendocino National Forest in the north, it stretches southward 80 miles, almost to 80 in Solano County. From the Sacramento Valley on the east, it extends westward over 20 miles to Clear Lake and to the Napa Valley.

WILD AS CAN BE.
The BRBNA is breathtakingly remote - only a few roads traverse its vast reaches. Half of its lands are publicly owned, the rest are mostly private ranchlands. This wild and working landscape is ranked as one of the most biologically diverse places in the United States, supporting large mammals, eagles, hawks and other birds, and large numbers of other animals. It also has unusual concentrations of undisturbed native vegetation, including oak woodlands, grasslands, chaparral and rare serpentine habitat.

UNDISCOVERED.
Boating and picnicking at Lake Berryessa and raft trips along Cache Creek are familiar to many people. But beyond these places lie great opportunities to get completely away from crowds, to take in majestic views of hundreds of miles of dramatic scenery, and to enjoy outstanding hiking, biking, and even kayaking. The BRBNA has plenty to offer those seeking a quieter, wilder place to recreate.

CLOSE TO HOME.
From downtown Sacramento, it's a 45 minute drive to the heart of the BRBNA, and from the central Bay Area, it's less than two hours. Day trips are easy to make, compared to the long drives needed to get into other mountainous areas of California.

Legend:

- BRBNA Boundary
- Wilderness Area
- California Dept of Fish and Game
- US Forest Service
- Bureau of Land Management
- Other Protected Land
- Destinations Great places to visit or learn more about

0 5 10 Miles

www.brtna.org

The Blue Ridge Berryessa Partnership is a voluntary, non-governmental association that promotes the conservation and enhancement of lands in the BRBNA by encouraging sensitive management of its natural resources. Through collaborative efforts among 100 groups the BRBNA conducts research, education and other projects to promote the best future for the Blue Ridge Berryessa area. We would like to thank all who have participated in recreation planning, especially the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, California Dept of Fish and Game, and the National Park Service. Funding from the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, and the Resource Legacy Fund Foundation made this project possible, with special support from the National Park Service, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program.

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Layout: John Gagliardi, edited by Emily Smith
Photos: © 2005 Greenleaf Network

The Lake Berryessa Wildlife Area

The Lake Berryessa Wildlife Area comprises 2000 acres of annual grasslands and blue oak woodlands owned by the Bureau of Reclamation and was originally slated to be managed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. The area represents the entire east shore of the lake and runs from the east side of Monticello Dam to Eticuera Creek. The east shore of Lake Berryessa is an undeveloped area backed by cattle ranches.

The well maintained gravel East Shore Ranch and Fire Access Road (East Shore Road) allows public access for almost six miles of the shoreline starting from the Knoxville-Berryessa Road and extending south to a turn-around loop. The area between the road and the water is the Lake Berryessa Wildlife Area. The road provides public access to the Wildlife Area as well as ranch and fire access. The Wildlife Area extends south from the end of the gravel road to the dam and is accessible only by foot or boat.

A Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 1995 stipulating a 30 year agreement between the Bureau of Reclamation and the Department of Fish and Game (DFG - now the Department of Fish and Wildlife.)

Reclamation agrees to:

1. Assist the Department in planning, preparing, and implementing the fish and wildlife management plan for the Lake Berryessa Wildlife Area;
2. Review and consult with the Department regarding any proposed activities applicable to the Lake Berryessa Wildlife Area;
3. Assist the Department in the management of all Federal and state endangered, threatened, rare and candidate species, and other fish and wildlife habitats in the Lake Berryessa Wildlife Area. This effort could include monitoring, inventory, site specific restoration and enhancement projects, and funding, contingent on the appropriation and allocation of funds;
4. Administer grazing permits within the Lake Berryessa Wildlife Area under the provisions and parameters to be established in the fish and wildlife management plan referred to above. In the interim, prior to the completion of such management plan, Reclamation will consult annually with the Department to determine a mutually acceptable grazing plan for the following year;
5. Maintain the road on the east side of Lake Berryessa to current standards, contingent on the appropriation and allocation of funds.

DFW agrees to

1. Plan, prepare and implement a fish and wildlife management plan for the Lake Berryessa Wildlife Area;
2. Review and consult with Reclamation regarding any proposed activities applicable to the Lake Berryessa Wildlife Area;
3. By each first day of December, submit to Reclamation for review an annual work plan of proposed projects and specific management objectives for the Lake Berryessa Wildlife Area for the following year;
4. Administer the Lake Berryessa Wildlife Area, pursuant to Section 550 of the Code of Regulations, Title 14.

A Management Plan was issued for the Lake Berryessa Wildlife Area in 1998 with three goals identified: 1. Manage access; 2. Reduce non-native plant species and protect native plant communities against noxious non-native species; and 3. Minimize wildfire threat.

From 1998 to 2007, during a period of considerable budget reductions and staff turnover in the Department of Fish and Game region, the Wildlife Area is only minimally managed.

In 2008 the Agriculture Department's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and UC Cooperative Extension (UCCE) produced the Lake Berryessa East Side Grazing Management Plan for the Wildlife Area. The NRCS stated that: "the [motivation for their involvement] was that this land had been ungrazed and mostly unmanaged for years and had formed a thick thatch of vegetation/grasses that did not provide the best wildlife habitat. Prescribed and managed grazing could improve the habitat values."

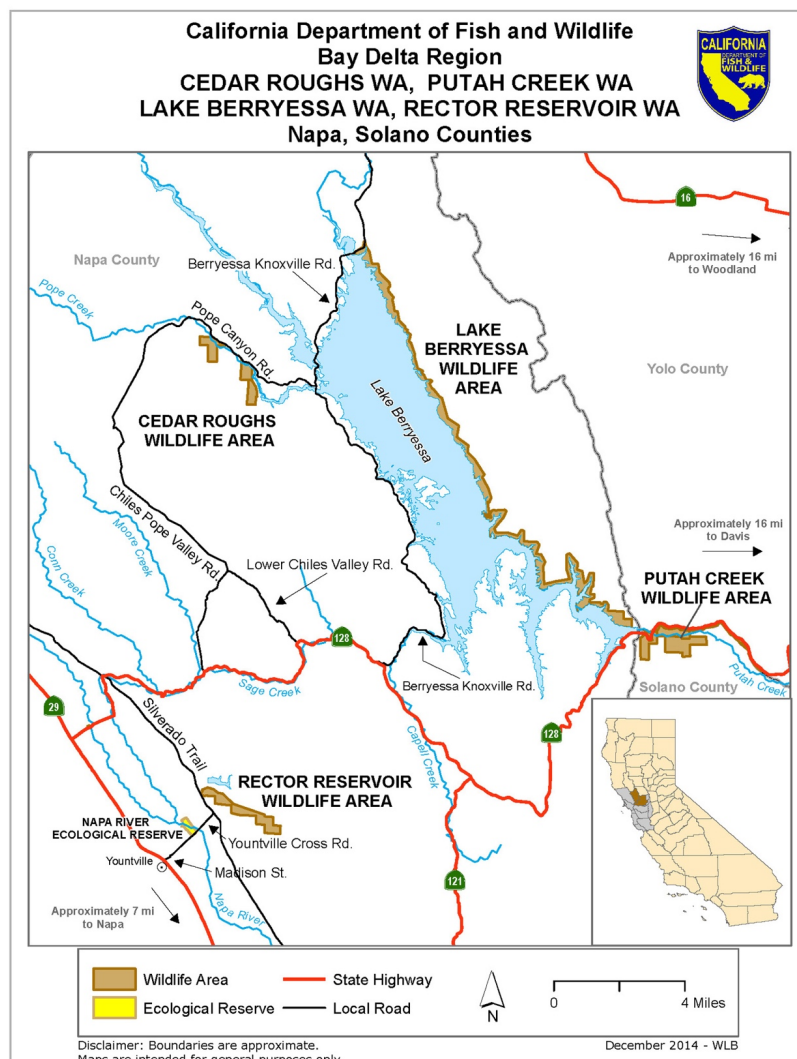
The grazing plan proposed prescribed grazing, fencing of sensitive creek/riparian habitat, planting of native riparian vegetation and oaks, and some attention of control of invasive plant species through grazing. The grazing would be monitored to ensure that enough forage remained at the end of the fall grazing season. Potential grazers would enter into a contractual agreement with the BOR, agreeing to meet all requirements, for the right to graze. NRCS emphasized that water quality protection would be paramount and that both NRCS and UCCE would be involved in monitoring and management oversight.

Initially, the local BOR staff were very positive concerning the plan, but no efforts were made to

implement it. At one point, a BOR resource manager indicated to NRCS staff that BOR had no intention of using grazing as a management tool in the Wildlife Area and had no interest or intention of promoting any aspect of the plan. The BOR indicated that it was an advocate of fire management and wanted to use controlled burns on the east shore. Although there were many reasons why such a plan would be challenging, the BOR said that there was no room for further discussion. This was the end of contacts with the BOR on this and all other issues.

The BOR performed two prescribed burns in recent years costing taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars to burn roughly 160 acres, but then decided to abort their program. The question remains for many people: Why spend this kind of money when cattle grazing can control vegetation with the same goal - fire vegetation management? Despite two recent wildfires that burned from the top of Berryessa Peak to the east shore waterline, the BOR seems to be standing firm against allowing ranchers to implement cattle grazing as a wildfire prevention/mitigation action on the federal land along the lakeshore.

The conflict between ranchers who are supported by the science, by the Lake Berryessa East Side Grazing Management Plan, by the NRCS and UCCE on the one hand and the Bureau of Reclamation's continued opposition to cattle grazing as a legitimate wildfire control strategy on other continues. But it has taken on a more significance due to the recent destructive wildfires on Lake Berryessa's East Side.



East Side Cattle Ranching History

The history of the "little known" East Side goes back to the inundating of the Berryessa Valley after construction of the dam. At first, cattle were allowed to graze the valley as the water pushed them to higher ground. There were three grazers: Gunn, Streblow, and Gamble. The cattle were comingled until the lake filled in 1959. From then on, while the County was in control of the seven concessions, and even later when the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) took back control in 1975, cattle grazing was allowed on the lake front. The area was divided by cattle guards on the East Side Road with drift fences running to the lake separating the different cattle ownerships. This program worked well controlling vegetation.

In 1998, when ranchers were told to remove their cattle from a 6-mile strip of northeastern Lake Berryessa shoreline, the environmentalist perspective was that to get the benefits of clean water, wide-open vistas, and healthy wildlife, society needed to set aside open space as public parkland and remove nonnative ungulates (hooved grazing mammals) so the land could heal and return to its native state. But now, after more than a decade of research on the question, it's becoming clear that well-managed private ranchlands can provide these essential public benefits at little cost to the public, while at the same time ensuring that the land remains economically productive.

When the BOR gave management of the East Side to the Department of Fish and Wildlife, there turned out to be no management at all. Fish and Wildlife built six miles of fence to separate the road from the lake and put up some nesting boxes and platforms for geese. But it seems this was too big a project for DFW which abandoned it to the BOR to manage.

One long-time rancher said he had worked with recognized professionals in range management to develop a management plan. Lake Berryessa East Side Grazing Management Plan was completed in July 2008 but fell on deaf ears. One of the excuses the BOR used for not allowing grazing is the fact that Native Americans once lived in the area. The Bureau felt that grazing animals over potential archeological sites would be disgraceful, even though ranching, as well as farming, had been a means of livelihood in the area since the Berryessa family lived there more than a century ago. Regarding cattle access to the lake, the only restriction is the Bureau's authority and who is currently sitting at BOR headquarters.

Many people have discussed the effects of cattle defecating in the lake with the US Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE). The two organizations have stated that, within a body of water of the size of Lake Berryessa, there can be no ill effects from pathogens or pollution. Therefore, cattle standing in or dropping cow pies in the water has no negative impact on the local environment or the people recreating in or on the water. Cattle have been doing this on flowage easements draining into the lake for 70 years now without any ill effects.

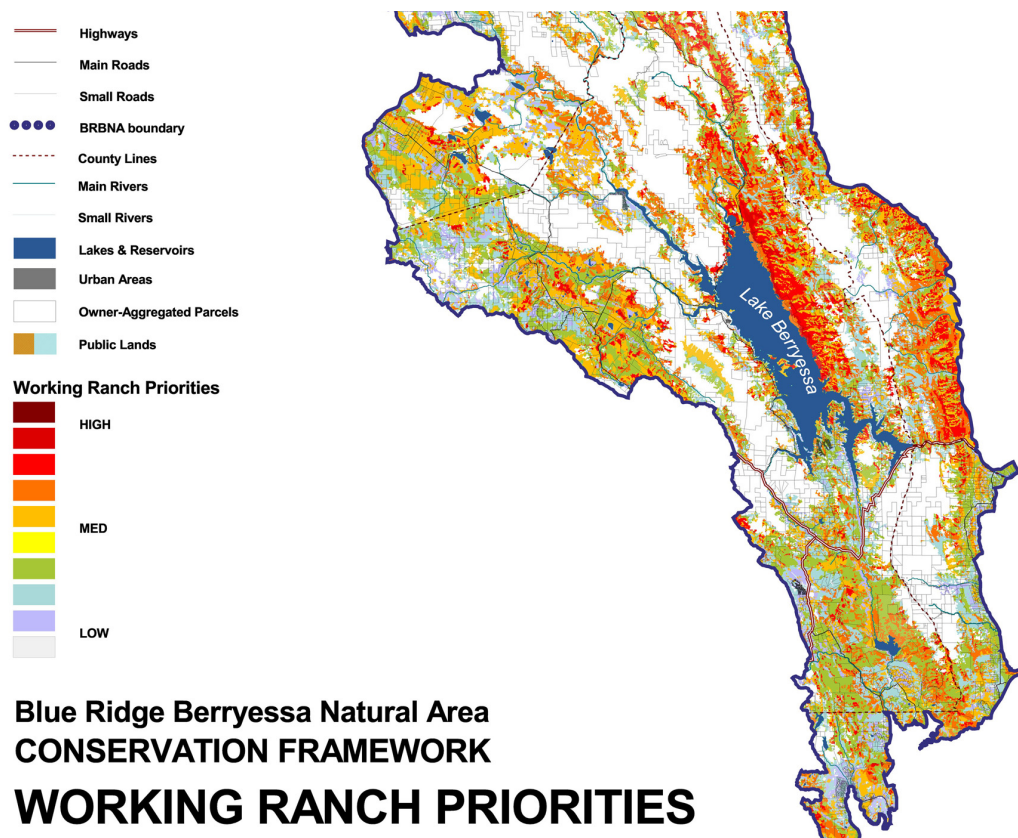
Lake Berryessa is the cleanest lake in northern California, as evidenced by the continuing monitoring of water quality by all the Solano County water agencies. As regularly documented, neither East Side cattle grazing nor the seven resorts and public recreation facilities around the lake have ever contributed to measurable water pollution.

Deputies Quick Thinking Saves A Bull (June 2021)

The Napa Sheriff's Department received a call for service a few years ago regarding a cow drowning in Lake Berryessa. Deputies arrived at the scene and found an exhausted bull struggling in water about 25 feet deep, approximately 400 yards off the shoreline of East Side Road. The deputies worked together to rope the bull, then carefully pulled him to shore with their jet skis. The owner of the bull was thankful for the quick thinking and hard work.



The Blue Ridge Berryessa Natural Area Conservation Partnership (BRBNA) published a detail "working ranches" map many years ago.

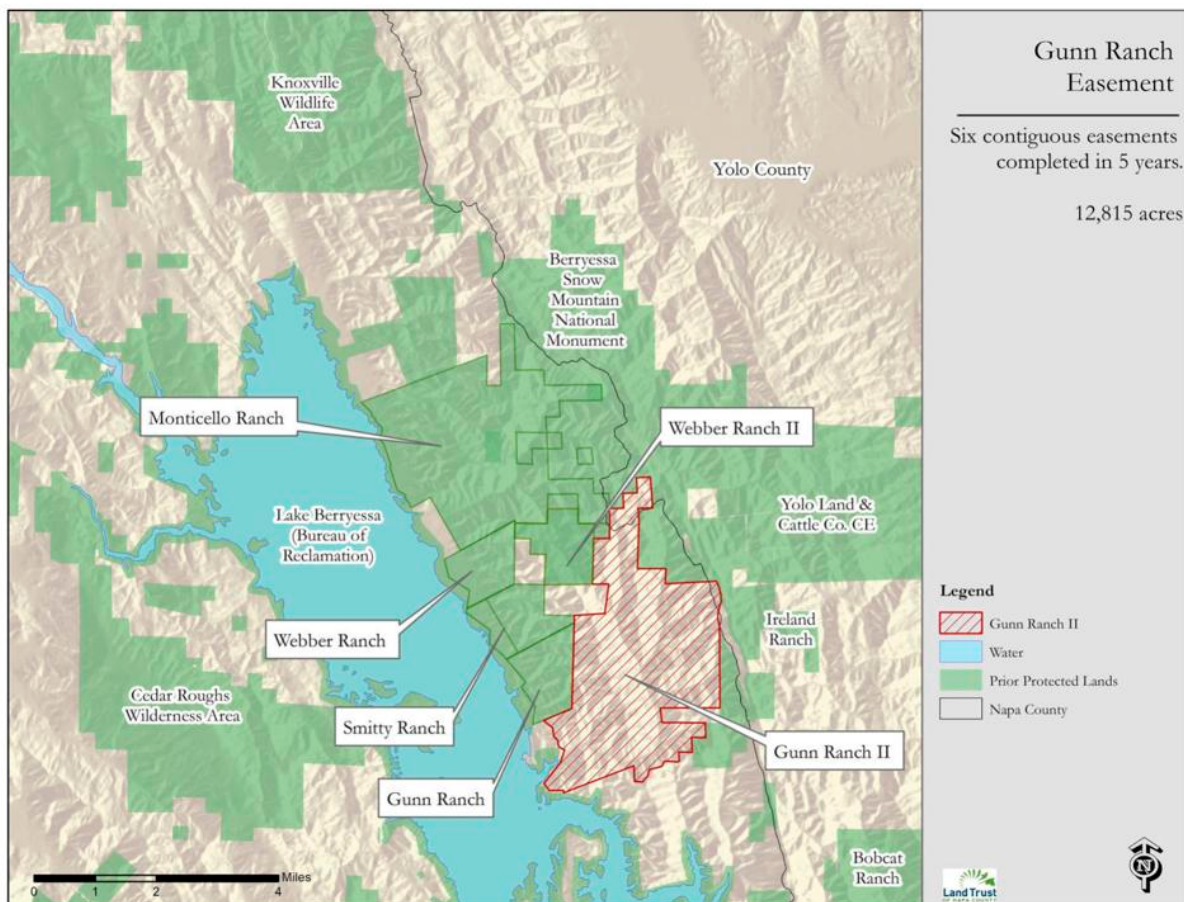


Who Owns What?

In 2020, the Land Trust of Napa County announced the completion of a conservation easement protecting 5,384 acres of Gunn Ranch on the east side of Lake Berryessa. During the last five years, the Land Trust had worked with landowners to complete six separate conservation easement projects in this area, "protecting" over 12,800 contiguous acres, including most of the land rising above the lake along its 10-mile-long eastern shore.

These easements eliminate all potential for residential and commercial development, as well as any cultivated agriculture, across the entire property. At the same time, the ongoing cattle ranching operation could continue as before with the addition of a sustainable management plan.

In 2017 almost seven square miles of ranchland on the east side of Lake Berryessa was put under a conservation easement which would guarantee the land would remain the same for future generations, no matter what pressures arise for "ranchette" development. This land is relatively remote and would be very difficult to develop, especially due to Napa County's 160 acre minimum parcel size rule. Some folks believe the land could have been threatened by so-called ranchette development, speculating that people would have been attracted by the great views of Lake Berryessa.



Non-Ranching Properties: There are several private parcels along East Side Road at the north end of the lake. Another little known private property area on the East Side is Monticello Dam Ranch advertised as a great recreation property! "Enjoy hunting, hiking, camping, ATV, and horse riding. So close to civilization but yet so peaceful. The views of Lake Berryessa are spectacular!" The entrance to the property is at the base of the Monticello Dam. The area includes the Putah Creek Ranch Owners Association consisting of a number of private parcels.