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Ranchers split on supporting grazing permit buyout

BY MELANIE LENART

With drought withering the landscape and government regulations increasingly cutting into profits, some ranchers are supporting a plan that would allow a one-time buyout of cattle-grazing permits on federal lands.

More than 165 Arizona ranchers support a bill introduced into Congress by Rep. Raúl Grijalva (Arizona District 7) to pay ranchers \$175 per "animal unit month" to retire their grazing permits on federal lands. One animal unit month is equivalent to a cow and her calf grazing for one month, so a rancher who typically has grazed 100 cow-calf pairs for six months of the year would gain \$105,000 in the one-time-only deal, if the bill were approved by Congress. The bill has been assigned to committees for study.

Grijalva's bill (House Resolution 3337) suggests that Arizona serve as the pilot project for a grazing permit buyout. In addition, he has supported an earlier bill (H.R. 3324) that would

provide a similar opportunity to other ranchers across the nation.

Grijalva cited the ongoing drought and the fact that ranchers and environmentalists worked together to come up with the plan as two good reasons for starting a program in Arizona.

"Many ranchers in Arizona are suffering financially because of the changing economics in cattle production, but also because of environmental changes. The drought is requiring them to reduce livestock numbers on the land, and some simply cannot make a living," the congressman stated.

Researchers on the Climate Assessment for the Southwest (CLIMAS) project found that the four-year cool-season precipitation average from 1999–2002 was the worst in the instrumental record, with the period from 1901–1904 ranking second and 1954–1957 ranking fourth. The period at the beginning of the 20th century spelled disaster for ranchers at the time, some of whom took to selling the bones of dead cattle for fertilizer to get by (Bahre and Shelton, 1996), and some modern ranchers still remember the struggles caused by the 1950s drought.

Ranchers who depend on the Tonto National Forest near Phoenix for ranching have been particularly hard-hit by the current drought and the required reductions in cattle grazing. Perhaps this helps explain the predominance among the nine ranchers spearheading the buyout plan along with representatives from several environmental

groups on the Arizona Grazing Permit Buyout Campaign. John Whitney IV, campaign chairman and part of the family-owned Circle Bar Ranch just outside Phoenix, said the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service's response to the drought is threatening to put many ranchers out of business.

Right now, only 3 percent of the cattle permitted for grazing on the Tonto National Forest are actually occupying the land, according to Buck McKinney, range conservationist for the Tonto. The drought has reduced vegetation cover, causing the Forest Service to limit cattle grazing. But in some cases, ranchers themselves have made the decision not to graze cattle on the Tonto, McKinney said.

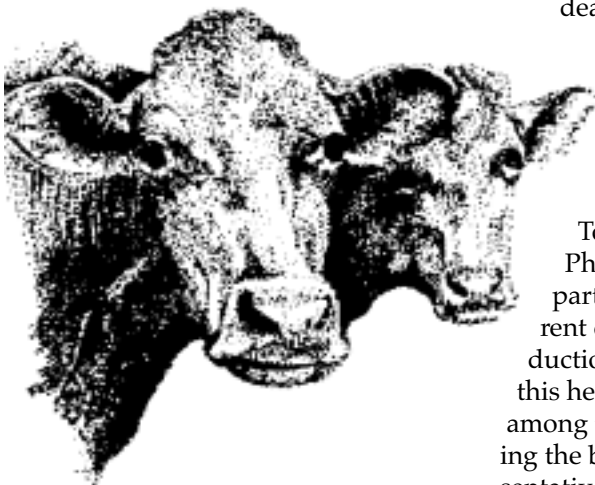
Whitney challenged the notion that the ranchers had a choice in the reduction in cattle-grazing numbers.

"These are not hobby ranchers. They ranch for a living. So why would they not put cattle on the land if they could?" he asked rhetorically.

The Circle Bar Ranch has been restricted from putting any cattle on its allotment for several years because of the drought, Whitney said. In addition, they have been notified that they will only be allowed to graze about half of the usual 1,250 cow-calf pairs when they do get the green light to start grazing again, he said.

"The ranchers look at it as, 'If you're going to cut my cattle in half, you're going to put me out of business,'" he said. He compared the ranchers' frustration to that of car dealers trying to

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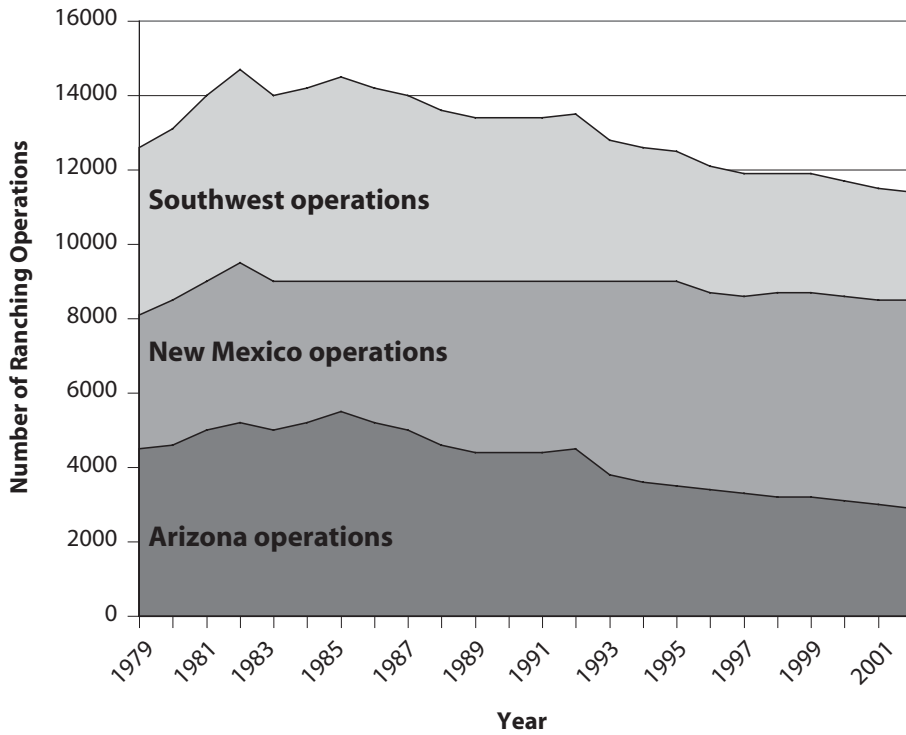


Figure 1. The total number of ranching operations in the southwestern states of Arizona and New Mexico has been declining in recent years. The early to mid-1980s represented a peak in ranching operations for the Southwest during this time frame, 1979–2002. Data were gathered from the National Agricultural Statistics Service website.

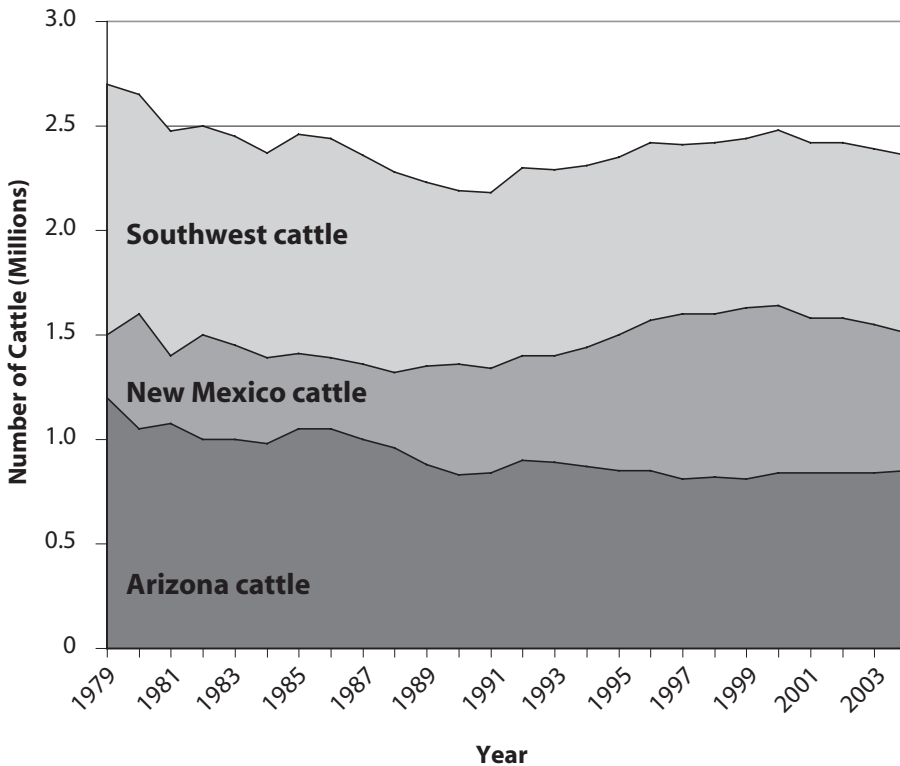


Figure 2. The number of cattle in Arizona has declined since 1992, with some of this drop attributable to drought impacts on the landscape. In New Mexico, the number of cattle was lower during much of the 1980s than in more recent years, but numbers began to drop again in the year 2000. Data were gathered from the National Agricultural Statistics Service website.

Permit buyout, continued

make a living while being told how many cars they can sell each year.

Forest Service policy and management practices for grazing allotments irked many of the roughly 50 Arizona ranchers surveyed between 1998 and 2002 by researchers for CLIMAS, the University of Arizona group that produces the Southwest Climate Outlook, among other activities. The surveyed ranchers indicated they rarely viewed drought as a primary motivation for ranch sales, but rather saw government regulations as the main culprit.

The number of ranching operations dropped by 17 percent in Arizona and by about 6 percent in New Mexico from 1995 to 2002 (Figure 1), according to data from the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). In Arizona, the drop occurred in all size classes, so consolidation of ranches into larger units would not explain the decrease. Similarly, in New Mexico, the decline occurred mainly in larger operations, while the number of operations with less than 50 heads of cattle increased slightly.

In addition, Arizona ranchers increased the number of cattle on supplemental feed by 45 percent while the total number of cattle dropped by 1 percent for that same time period (1995–2002), according to NASS figures (Figure 2). In New Mexico, the proportion of cattle on supplemental feed actually declined by 30 percent during that time frame, while the total number of cattle increased by about 5 percent. However, the number of cattle in New Mexico dropped by about 6 percent between 1998 and 2004, and were generally lower during the 1980s, so timing of severe agricultural drought impacts probably differed in the two southwestern states.

Although the proposed buyout bill frames the current ranching woes in the context of the drought, a spokesperson for the Arizona Cattle Growers Association (ACGA) considers dealing with drought all in a day’s work.

"It's the same as it's always been. The livestock people all over the world have spent their whole life dealing with drought," maintained ACGA Natural Resources Director Charles "Doc" Lane. "We believe in raising fat, contented animals. If you depend on the land and the climate, the only way to raise fat, contented animals is to have fewer of them during the drought."

The association opposes the grazing permit buyout plan, putting dozens of individual ranchers in the unusual position of agreeing with environmentalists more than their fellow ranchers who run the ACGA.

During a recent phone call, Lane expressed the Association's stance that ranchers who are suffering financially should sell their ranch to others who will carry on the ranching tradition. "If I sell a ranch during a drought, chances are someone will come along and buy it because they know the drought will break sometime," he added.

Meanwhile, Lane feared that retiring ranching permits would threaten the rural lifestyle that ranchers love, would reduce regional food security, and would challenge the Forest Service's traditional "multiple use" of forests.

Forest Service land managers have been responding to a push from many members of society to consider issues of water quality, fire hazards, and recreational values of forests when designing plans for their "multiple use," which traditionally have involved timber harvesting, mineral extraction, and cattle grazing.

"The point is we can't just have a place to play. We have to have a place to produce goods and services," he said, adding that Phoenix's local food supply would run out in seven days were it not for continual replenishment. "If disaster struck, and importation of food from other parts of the nation cannot occur, in eight days the people of Phoenix are fighting over the last of the food. But on Day Eight

you cannot say, 'OK, we have decided we do need to produce food.' "

The buyout campaign chairman challenged the contention that continued ranching on federal lands would help guarantee an ongoing food supply in an emergency.

"The cows produced in Arizona wouldn't provide for anybody very long," Whitney noted.

The ranchers also disagree on which approach, business as usual or a paid-off retirement of grazing permits, would be more likely to encourage development of rural areas via subdivision of ranches.

Only 3 percent of the nation's beef producers hold federal grazing permits, said Daniel Patterson, an ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) in Tucson. The center has a representative on the campaign steering committee headed by Whitney, and a CBD meeting with Phoenix ranchers in August 2002 helped launch the Arizona grazing permit buyout proposal.

"Drought is a climate reality in the Southwest, and it will be an issue in the future because it certainly affects the permittees and the land. Some of them have been more supportive of the buyout because of the desertification," Patterson said.

Meanwhile, private conservation groups have already successfully bought grazing permits from permittees to protect the desert tortoise in California's Mohave National Preserve, Patterson said. But he noted that grazing changes proposed late last year by the Bush administration would threaten such solutions.

"It's important to have Congress weigh in on this solution and stop the Bush administration from derailing a win-win buyout solution to end public lands ranching conflicts," Patterson said. The CBD expects to devote a full-

time staff member to this project for years to come, if necessary, he said. Despite agreement between some ranchers and environmentalists, the disagreement within the ranching community promises to make this an issue of contention that eludes a quick fix. The conflict does serve to illustrate, however, how drought can aggravate existing societal tensions over resources.

The complexity of balancing economic and cultural values with riparian conservation and fire management values on public lands becomes all the more apparent during times of drought. Although it may be unrealistic to expect a simple solution that receives universal support, it seems clear that drought will provoke discussions that would otherwise be relegated to the back burner, including the issue of cattle grazing on public lands.

Related Links and Papers

As part of the "Reconstructing Past Climate in the Southwest" project, the CLIMAS website provides instrumental records for 1896–2002 and tree-ring records to reconstruct cool-season precipitation for 1000–1896. An online tool to access this data is available at <http://www.ispe.arizona.edu/climas/research/paleoclimate/product.html>.

The National Agricultural Statistics Service compiles a variety of data related to ranching. The database can be searched for specific data by selecting "U.S. and State Data" and then "Cattle" from the following website: <http://www.nass.usda.gov:81/ipedb/>.

The Arizona Grazing Permit Buyout Campaign website allows cattle and sheep ranchers to calculate their possible compensation for a grazing permit buyout, and lists ranchers who publicly support the campaign, among other features. <http://www.azbuyout.org/buyout/cont.htm>.

Bahre, C. J., and M. L. Shelton. 1996. Rangeland destruction: Cattle and drought in southeastern Arizona at the turn of the century. *Journal of the Southwest*, 38(1):1–22.

