



My Turn

On changing policies for overgrazing of federal lands

BRIAN SHIELDS

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For the past 23 years, Amigos Bravos has denounced in the strongest terms possible the overgrazing of federal lands throughout the West, specifically along river banks in New Mexico. We have been honored to work closely with Jerry Yeargin (Feb. 9 My turn, “Open letter to Amigos Bravos members”) and other Amigos Bravos members on the effort to keep the riparian enclosure in the upper Rio Fernando watershed cattle-free.

The Rio Fernando enclosure was originally built by the Izaak Walton League to protect the river’s fertile banks from trampling by cattle and its waters from pollution by cattle waste. Much to our chagrin, the Forest Service has had the audacity to allow the enclosure to become a pasture for rotating cattle. Amigos Bravos has explored legal strategies for addressing this problem and has not found a quick fix. We are documenting the harm done to the river through sampling done by the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED), the US Forest Service, and by Amigos Bravos in our partnership with Sentinels de Taos. The results of this sampling led us to actively advocate listing the Rio Fernando on the 303d list of impaired waters.

In addition, we have advocated over the years for protective water quality standards for the R’o Fernando. When the state wanted to weaken standards for the river we successfully urged EPA to prohibit the downgrading of protections.

As a result, water quality standards remain strong for the Rio Fernando and NMED has for the first time listed the Rio Fernando as impaired for ecoli in its report to the US Congress, under the requirements of the Clean Water Act (CWA). To our knowledge this is the first time NMED has approved and submitted community water quality data in its report to Congress.

Under the CWA, once a stream is listed as impaired on the 303d list, as the Fernando is now, NMED and the USFS have a legal responsibility to restore water quality. Our strategy is to use the Clean Water Act’s mandate to affect Forest Service policy and, in this instance, practice.

Amigos Bravos has tremendous expertise in the use of the CWA as a tool to protect and restore rivers, streams and wetlands. Other strategies, in New Mexico and elsewhere, have failed to be able to address the issues raised by environmentally unsustainable grazing practices and their impacts to human health.

The attempt to change grazing policy directly has been a focus of environmental groups throughout the West since John Muir advocated for the establishment of Yosemite National Park to protect the area from overgrazing by sheep.

The effort to establish and maintain sustainable grazing policies has been a thankless and seemingly Sisyphean task due to the entrenched bureaucracy of the Forest Service and the fact that the Forest Service is an agency within the Department of Agriculture.

The Amigos Bravos Board of Directors and staff believe that our long-term strategy will produce the results we seek. Deeply entrenched problems take decades to solve and those solutions depend on the stability and resolve of community members and committed organizations.

Amigos Bravos is familiar with the stamina required due to our fight over the past 23 years to address water quality issues at the MolyCorp-Chevron mine, our work of over the past eight years to hold Los Alamos National Lab accountable for toxic storm water discharges, as well as our 10-year efforts to reintroduce river otters in New Mexico.

We thank Mr. Yeargin for raising the issue of overgrazing on public lands in such a way as to continue the effort to bring it to public awareness. Perhaps the Forest Service will respond to the public interest and return the riparian enclosure in the upper Rio Fernando to its original purpose — to exclude cattle from the river. We encourage our members and the public to express their concerns to the Carson Forest Service.

Brian Shields is the executive director of Amigos Bravos.