

## **My Turn**

### **Time for a change on Western waters**

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A popular song from the '60s began, "I will now proceed to untangle the entire area." (Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young.) In this letter I hope to untangle the area of livestock grazing on New Mexico's public lands.

After decades of up-close personal observation of cattle behavior, I can assure you of one crucial fact: cows would rather remain in riparian areas, compared to grazing on open rangeland. They prefer the succulent vegetation along streams, the shade, and the easy access to water.

This natural tendency of livestock can be dealt with.

Back in the days before government ownership of the land, cowboys had full-time jobs moving the herds onto fresh rangeland and then back to water on a daily basis.

They did all that work for two good reasons. First, large herds can gain weight more quickly on rangeland grasses than they do in narrow riparian corridors. Second, the oldtime ranchers were extremely protective of their limited surface waters, and they didn't want the river banks to be destroyed by the continuous trampling of herds of cattle.

That was a long time ago.

Since then, "traditionally," livestock have been grazing on almost all Western lands without the daily supervision of working cowboys.

In a feeble effort toward sustainable grazing, the herds are occasionally rotated to different sections of a given allotment. But even in roadless areas "weekend cowboys" sometimes do that using ATVs, which adds to erosion problems.

Except when they are being moved for rotation, the herds are allowed to choose their own locations at will. Because of the natural preference of livestock for riparian areas this results in huge, ongoing impacts to stream banks and wetlands, while nearby rangeland grasses are often virtually ungrazed.

In a time of high labor costs, the cowboys will not be returning to stay with the cattle and move them away from the streams on a regular basis, unless new federal regulations require them to

do so.

Currently, there is no real accountability for federal livestock permittees. Amazingly, national forest guidelines call for grazing in all riparian areas down to “4-inch stubble.”

After many decades, the misguided “stubble” rule has resulted in the destruction of much of the turf and shrubs along the surface waters on Western public lands. (The fact is, cattle do eat the bushes on streambanks along with the grass.) So the stubble policy has caused the loss of the water retention capacities that used to be provided by abundant streamside vegetation. And inevitably, we have gotten the reduced water flows and reduced rainfall that can be seen today all over the West.

The rapidly changing climate and more frequent droughts are greatly aggravating the historical impacts of “traditional” riparian grazing.

The solution is for concerned citizens to demand new federal regulations and strict new enforcement policies.

The only thing that will save surface waters in the West is a new rule for grazing on federal land, which would specify that cattle must be moved from riparian areas after a limited percentage of the available forage has been used. If only 30 percent of streamside vegetation were allowed for grazing each year, our river environments would gradually return to health with knee-high grasses, shrubs, more wildlife, and increased water flows.

In other words let’s put the cowboys and cowgirls back to work, with digital cameras this time around instead of six-shooters. Federal officials should require livestock owners to monitor their herds daily, by horseback, with notes and photos on the Web to document new limited levels of riparian grazing on public land.

In order to be effective, these new regulations must have sharp teeth. Compliance failures by permittees should result in the loss of their grazing permits.

I will be establishing a petition movement for better grazing policies on the [Change.org](http://Change.org) website and at [WhiteHouse.gov](http://WhiteHouse.gov) . Also, I plan to start a Facebook page (gasp) to promote public support for these petitions. (Yes, me, the notorious hermit, on Facebook!) All jokes aside, the time has passed when a tiny minority of livestock owners can be permitted to slowly destroy the precious water resources that the other 99 percent of Westerners are depending on.

So I’d like to hear from you about your ideas on how to achieve sustainable grazing.

Please watch *The Taos News* for reports on these new Internet sites to help mobilize support for sensible, modern grazing policies. In the meantime, you can reach me at [jerryeargin@gmail.com](mailto:jerryeargin@gmail.com). Thank you for caring.

*Jerry Yeargin has lived in the Taos area since 1976.*

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