

## My Turn

# Now it's time for action

**Jerry Yeargin**

*The Taos News, 5/30/2013*

Some scientists say that the great Anasazi civilization of this region collapsed and scattered about a thousand years ago, because of water management issues. No one is sure what went wrong. Did their fields become salty from centuries of irrigation? Was it drought? Bad ju-ju? Whatever the reasons, the Anasazi traditional ways no longer fit their time and place, and they left. In modern-day New Mexico we also live in changing times, whether we like it or not.

The "old ways" of the American West were established hundreds of years ago, at least in myth. Traditionally, that myth included unfettered access by open-range cattle to all the rivers and streams in the land.

That picture of the Wild West is just an old movie now. It's gone. In today's West, ranchers need to maintain many miles of fencing, along with watering facilities for cattle located up on the rangelands, away from the rivers. Ranch owners have to do all that work because most private rangeland in Western states is farther out, away from streams and wetlands. The same is true on federal land.

As one Forest Service manager said recently, riparian zones are only about 2 or 3 percent of the acreage in the Carson National Forest.

New, alternative watering facilities for livestock on national forest land are feasible. If those improvements are phased in first, riparian zones could be protected with fencing and herding practices, to keep the cattle out of the streams and on the rangeland. Additional protections would actually benefit grazing permittees, by ensuring water sources for livestock on the adjacent pastures.

The recent *Taos News* article about beaver, by Phil Carter, was a great introduction to the best way to restore damaged streams and wetlands naturally — with beaver. First, of course, we would need a state or county ban against hunting or trapping beaver on public lands. Sadly, the native beaver population has been killed off in most areas of New Mexico.

When beaver are protected on the watersheds on federal land, they will build and maintain extensive networks of reservoirs in the mountains. Beaver ponds would restore headwaters that have lost yearround flows in recent years, like the upper Rio Fernando in Taos Canyon.

Protecting the return of the beaver is a simple and effective water policy that would mitigate the effects of global warming and drought throughout the West, at virtually no cost to the taxpayers.

Likewise, it would cost taxpayers nothing for the Forest Service to change it's yearly instructions that have been telling permittees to graze riparian zones down to "stubble."

As a local fishing guide pointed out in the May 2-8

*Taos News*, "poor grazing and forest management ... result in less water downstream." That is why Carson Forest officials should end the notorious stubble rule, to allow local stream banks on federal land to recover.

Speaking of land management, a recent column in *The Taos News*, by Ernie Atencio, seemed to say that local grazing land is protected by a tradition of *querencia*, which is a Spanish word meaning “affection for a favorite spot.” With all due respect, I must say that people everywhere have those feelings, and in all cultures. Even so, I’m guessing that *querencia* only goes so far.

Under the existing Forest Service guideline, grazing permittees (of whatever ethnic persuasion) are instructed to leave stubble approximately 4 inches tall on all stream banks and wetlands. In actual practice, in many places there is only 1-inch stubble or bare dirt left after livestock grazing. Naturally, this intensive riparian grazing also leaves large deposits of cow patties in or near the water.

By the way, the Forest Service refers to cow manure as “nutrients,” like it’s a good thing. But the NMED says it is a source of bacteria that causes water pollution. Which raises the question: is cow manure nutritious, or polluting?

Maybe it depends on where you find it — in the pastures, or in the water supply. Or in a creek where children are playing ... These days, people in Western states are well aware of the growing climate threats and contamination affecting our water sources. And the majority of citizens in Western states are no longer willing to let federal managers rely on the noble intentions of a tiny minority of Westerners who own the grazing permits along our public waterways.

Most people in Taos, if asked, would say that water sources and riparian ecosystems on federal land need more local protection from livestock grazing and other impacts.

Now it’s time for action. If we expect to avoid the fate of our forerunners, the Anasazi, we need to adjust our traditions and start excluding cattle from the streams and wetlands on the Carson Forest.

And for God’s sake, bring back the beavers!

*Jerry Yeargin, of Taos, is working for watershed protection on federal land. His email address is [jerryyeargin@gmail.com](mailto:jerryyeargin@gmail.com).*