



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## My Turn

### **'There is no substitute for healthy streams and rivers'**

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In 2015, the Forest Service has once again scheduled intensive grazing — down to “4-inch stubble” — on stream banks and wetlands across the West. This issue concerns all of us because many Western towns, homes, and ranches are located downstream from streams and rivers on public lands. People, agriculture, livestock, and the environment depend on federal water sources every day.

Speaking of livestock and the environment, National Public Radio recently broke the news that overgrazing has caused swarms of large, moving sand dunes in the Four Corners area. This regional crisis has already created climate change refugees within the Navajo reservation.

Northern New Mexico, which is downwind from the creeping sand dunes, is not immune to this new environmental threat. NPR's report said that tumbleweeds can spread wherever vegetative cover is lacking. When tumbleweeds blow in and take root, the land dries out because this thirsty invader takes much more water out of the ground than grasses and trees.

Because of climate change and droughts, overgrazed Western lands are endangered by spreading sand dunes, tumbleweeds, and dwindling water sources. As water becomes ever more precious, some traditional grazing practices have become outdated and should be changed. Unlike overgrazed areas, healthy wetlands and stream banks have well-established trees, shrubs, and tall grasses. Abundant native vegetation makes a shady “green sponge” that soaks up spring runoff and storm surges and releases that water slowly to supply year-round flows.

Obviously, New Mexicans need reliable flows of cold, clean water in the streams and rivers of our national forests. We cannot reach that goal without new federal land management practices to increase vegetative cover along streams with tall grasses, shrubs, and trees instead of 4-inch stubble.

Significantly, stream banks and wetlands are just a tiny fraction of the land area in this large, semi-arid state. There is plenty of room for New Mexico's grazing permittees elsewhere on federal and state rangelands. There is no real need for intensive federal grazing on stream banks, a practice which is causing pollution and blocking surface flows with mud from livestock trampling.

According to the nationally known water advocates at Amigos Bravos, there have now been seven consecutive years of Clean Water Act violations on the upper Rio Fernando in Taos Canyon. Many local observers are convinced that the growing problems on the Rio Fernando

headwaters are caused by intensive federal grazing on stream banks and wetlands, resulting in the loss of vegetative cover.

Luckily, there is a legal remedy that could solve the problem of excessive livestock impacts on water sources in national forests. Most people don't realize this, but federal law requires the Forest Service and grazing permittees to comply with all state and local livestock regulations to protect water resources. Now, after seven years of Clean Water Act violations caused by grazing, Taos elected leaders need to hold Carson Forest officials accountable. The county commissioners should pass a strong, enforceable ordinance this year to prevent further water losses on the Rio Fernando.

There is no substitute for healthy streams and rivers. It is time for Taosenos to demand the simple, effective changes that are needed to protect the historic Rio Fernando de Taos and restore the year-round flows that people and wildlife have relied on for centuries.

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