Banking on grass, cooperation in Northern NM

Cooperation, an important permaculture principle, was the theme at the Quivira Coalition's Grassbanking Conference last month in Santa Fe. "Grassbanking," a new term coined by poet Drum Hadley, is simple: Overgrazed land rests, while undergrazed (and fire-suppressed) land is trimmed by cattle to reduce catastrophic fire danger Meanwhile, ranchers maintain their ancient, essential way of life, and Northern New Mexico gets a homegrown product to market.
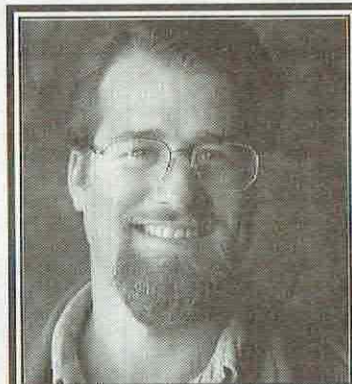
The bank analogy fits. But instead of money, grasslands are loaned. The payback comes in the form of the service that cattle provide. Public lands are the focus, but large private landowners could get into the act, too.

Before the Santa Fe Railroad unloaded boxcars full of sheep, periodic, low-heat grass fires kept forests healthy, according to panelist and historian Craig Allen. Up until the 1880s, ample grass thrived in larger meadows. Grass even spread throughout the more sparse ponderosa pine forests. Intensive grazing, however, reduced the frequency of fire, which caused forests to thicken to today's tinderboxes.

The good news is that ranching can reduce the chance of such fires. At the same time, some ranchland has become so denuded that serious erosion is the norm. Grass cover is the exception. Small ranchers struggle to survive as streams are inundated with silt. Resting and improving land with erosion-control measures, while allowing ranchers to maintain their livelihoods, makes good sense.

For too long ranchers and environmentalists have been unable to cooperate. The grassbank on top of Rowe Mesa, one of the first ever initiated, embraced the interests and concerns of at least six government bureaucracies, a couple of philanthropic foundations, numerous nonprofit organizations, ranchers, neighboring landowners and many others. It seems, with so many entities involved, the

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only time grassbanking would come before hard work would be in the dictionary. The hope is that the work will be made easier as people get used to the concept.

Author and charismatic conference moderator Bill Debuys suggested that the success of the pioneering effort on Rowe Mesa grew out of Northern New Mexico's strong tradition of communal land use.

Conferees were welcomed with a straight-talking but humorous address from Santa Fe's Stewart Udall. Born in the tough ranching country near Hardscrabble Draw in southeastern Arizona, the man best known as JFK's conservationist Interior Secretary spoke of cooking mountain oysters and riding with cowboys as a kid. As a personification of the cooperation necessary among ranchers and environmentalists, his hopeful message was an inspiration.

During the chicken-dinner fundraiser at La Fonda, farmer-philosopher Wendell Berry drove home the challenges we face. In a country with more prisoners than farmers, in a world where 250 people have as much wealth as the combined wealth of half the total population, and at a time when international corporations have become value-free immortals, Berry said cooperative strategies that invigorate local economies are key.

Grassbanking not only is an opportunity to steward land and reduce property damage due to fire and erosion, but an opportunity to provide examples of people with diametrically opposed viewpoints working together. Perhaps, using these examples, developers and those who are worried about other land-use issues (water, timber, open-space, property taxes, light pollution, traffic and the commercialization of traditional communities, for example) can take similar steps toward common ground.

All will benefit by understanding permaculture's ethics: care for the earth and for people. As panelist Virgil Trujillo said, this means liberating oneself from the fast-paced, "microwave" mentality that has taken over our culture. This might be the hardest work of all.

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