

High elevation grasslands as a crucial resource to ranchers of northern New Mexico

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Introduction High-elevation grasslands of northern New Mexico (NM), located at the southern tip of the Rocky Mountains in the western United States, are a crucial resource for small-scale, family-owned ranches. Due to evolution of land acquisition in northern New Mexico, many of these lands are in public ownership, and ranchers must now rely upon government-managed grazing allotments for pasturing their livestock. Regulations and management decisions governing these lands, along with competition for use (e.g. recreation), can significantly affect the viability and survival of ranching throughout the area (Raish & McSweeney, 2003).

The place The mountain grasslands of northern New Mexico are coniferous forest clearings at altitudes exceeding 2400 m. Small meadows and grassy slopes are often dominated by cool-season, tall bunchgrasses such as *Danthonia*, *Deschampsia*, *Festuca*, *Koeleria*, *Muhlenbergia*, and *Poa* (Allred, in press). Owing to elevation, they receive greater precipitation than lower lying regions of the state, resulting in more dependable pasturage for livestock. This area has provided an historic resource for generations of ranching families.

The problem Many families of this region are of Hispanic origin, continuing a ranching heritage that began with Spanish colonization in 1598. Land use and ownership were confirmed by grants from the Spanish Crown and later by the Mexican government. Changes began to occur after U.S. conquest in 1848, resulting in the loss of over 80% of the grant lands (Westphall, 1965). The forest and grassland portions were acquired by government land agencies (US Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management), and are now used only under federal grazing permits. Approximately 34% of the six counties of northern New Mexico is now federally controlled (Eastman, *et al.*, 2000). Loss of grazing land has diminished the ranchers' ability to sustain their livelihoods from agriculture and, in turn, affects the viability of rural communities (Raish & McSweeney, 2003).

The people While income from livestock may not fully support a majority of these families, it is used in a variety of ways. In our study, we found that 93% of the permittee ranchers use part of the income from livestock to improve the ranching operation, 58% for basic living expenses, and 48% for family emergencies. In northern New Mexico, retaining family land and traditional values is regarded more highly than acquisition of material possessions or monetary gain. When asked to prioritize family goals and values (Figure 1), 95% of the participants ranked better quality of life and continuance of traditional values as more important than an increase in family income (Raish & McSweeney, 2003).

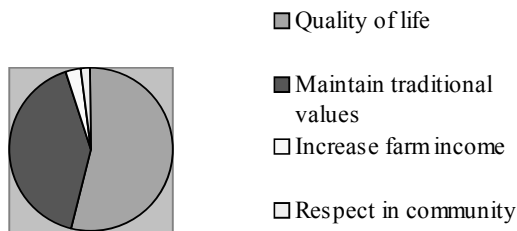


Figure 1 Family Goal Priorities

Conclusion Despite ongoing problems with land loss, encroaching urbanization, conflicts over land use, and government regulations, ranch families retain a strong attachment to the land. These mountain grasslands provide more than forage for cattle and sheep. The high-elevation grasslands of northern New Mexico play a role in maintaining the tradition, heritage, and culture of a land-based people.

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