Successes in Range Management

The Art of Ranching

Jo E. Schilling

Connie Taylor was pleased and amazed in 1989 when the New Mexico Association of Conservation Districts named her Rancher of the Year. She was pleased to receive the honor, she said, and amazed that the association was paying attention to a small-scale operation such as hers. Later that same year she received the Excellence in Grazing Management award from the Society for Range Management.

Taylor, a 40-ish former school teacher, runs about 130 head of sheep on 80 acres of rangeland once covered with pinyon-juniper and big sagebrush. Her ranch is located about 45 miles west of Taos, New Mexico, near the Carson National Forest. The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Soil Conservation Service has provided assistance for the past 13 years in perfecting her grazing management techniques which rely on a modified cell grazing system.

The ranch has 12 pastures in a short-duration rotation system. The pastures radiate out like wagon wheel spokes from a central hub where water and organically grown alfalfa supplements are available.

Editor's Note: The author is Public Affairs Specialist for the USDA-SCS in Rio Rancho, New Mexico.

Taylor's sheep from Cerro Mojino Woolworks produce multi-colored fleeces. (Photos on this page by J. Schilling)
The sheep-raisin business is a natural extension of Connie's interest in weaving. While studying archaeology in Colorado, she participated in several digs in New Mexico. It was at this time that her interest in weaving grew, as she pondered the basketry and textiles of ancient civilizations. She became acutely aware of the failure of earlier civilizations to manage their resources for sustainability and survival.

On one of her trips to New Mexico in the late 1970s she met Sam Taylor, an artist, living on "40 worthless acres" of sagebrush near the Carlson National Forest in Northern New Mexico. "I came to New Mexico on vacation and found that this man had built a house on my favorite camping site. I couldn't get him to move, so I married him," Taylor asserted.

Connie was born and raised in the heart of ranching country in the Nebraska Sandhills area. She raised a lamb for a 4-H project when she was 10 years old because, she said, "cattle were too big for me." After college she taught mid-school in Colorado for 12 years.

Husband Sam was raised in Wal- senburg, Colorado. During the summers he worked on nearby farms and ranches. The skills both Sam and Connie acquired as youths now make their ranching operation possible. Sam says their success is based on both "arrogance and ignorance." They were too ignorant to realize the size of the project they were undertaking, and too arrogant to let it fail.

Connie considers herself an earth artist. She works with wool, which is protein, which came from an animal, which ate grass, which grew from the earth. Many of her weavings express her political beliefs. The weaving keeps her going in the bad years and it's also what she does "for fun."

Taylor's sheep operation began with only 15 animals in 1977. She and Sam plowed and disked the sagebrush on the rangeland and reseeded it with Luna pubescent wheatgrass. Improved forage production has enabled Connie to increase her flock to about 130 head by 1990.

The Taylors built a boundary fence and cross fences for an intensive rotation system. Over time, they built stock pens, sheds, a wool processing building, a wool warehouse, a studio for Sam's painting, a welding shop for his sculpture creations, and, of course, a house.

The house has a southern exposure for passive solar gain. Coal-burning stoves provide additional heat in the winter. A wood-burning cook stove was recently replaced by a propane-fueled gas range. Electricity is generated by photovoltaic solar cells and stored in a bank of salvaged batteries, scrapped when a high-tech utility company went solid-state.

There is no well on the property. Rain and snowmelt collected from the roofs of several buildings provide almost all the water they need for household, livestock, and commercial use. Occasionally, they must haul a tank of water from Tres Piedras, 16 miles away. Theirs is an example of sustainable agriculture.
and a sustainable lifestyle.

Taylor raises purebred Perendale sheep from New Zealand as well as registered Navajo-Churros. The Churros were recently declared a state treasure in New Mexico because of their historic place in local culture. They were first introduced by the Spanish settlers who arrived in the 1500s. Taylor recently acquired a four-horned Churro ram for her flock. In addition, she has a number of mixed-breed sheep. (See photo on outside back cover.)

While Sam paints and sculpts, Connie operates a wool processing business, Cerro Mojino Woolworks. It is currently operating at full capacity, and she sometimes must turn customers away. This year she expects to process 2 tons of wool, some of it her own, and some from wool workers throughout the United States.

Viewing much advertising as a waste of paper and a needless slaughter of good trees, Connie relies on word-of-mouth referrals to sustain her wool processing business. “There’s something about ‘discovering’ a business like mine that excites my customers. It’s almost as if I’m trying to keep it a secret. When wool growers, spinners or weavers find me, we share a more intimate relationship because we have many things in common. Because we are so remotely located, too, it’s great fun when these people come for a visit,” she said.

With no phone, infrequent mail, and no help on the ranch, Taylor sees self-reliance as her biggest challenge. Reflecting further on the challenges of life in isolated northern New Mexico, she tells of hour-long conference calls, as a board member of a wool growers association, at the Tres Piedras pay phone booth—usually in winter—where the glass is missing from one side, and the roof drips snowmelt and rain.

In contrast, lambing is the most fun because it’s always a surprise to see what kind of lamb will arrive. All of her sheep are of different colors: white, brown, black, and various combinations thereof.

She has refrained from much public land grazing simply because she hasn’t needed it. Her flocks have been relatively protected within her fences, and she prefers to keep them at home where their fleeces stay remarkably clean.

Five elk once entered her property by jumping the fence to get to the lush pastures. The noise of a log splitter didn’t frighten them, but the click of a camera shutter sent them bolting back into the forest. In defense against further elk raids, she seeded grass outside her fences.

Taylor said she believes strongly in multiple use of most public lands. She asserts that public rangelands can be enhanced by careful grazing management.

The opposing sides of the issue of grazing on public lands have become so polarized, she said, she fears a reasonable solution will be difficult to reach. She emphasizes searching for common ground, seeking a balance, and working out a compromise that everyone can live with.

“I have first-hand knowledge of the benefits of proper range management. The techniques we’ve used have turned ‘40 worthless acres’ into a self-sustaining, productive ranch that supports people, livestock, wildlife, and a commercial wool operation.

“Decisions on public land use shouldn’t be based on who has the most money to lobby with, but on what’s ultimately best for the land,” she said.