

The Diamond Bar The Real Story

Jed Elrod

As the preservationist movement progresses in the United States, fewer and fewer of this country's population have hands-on contact or experience with production agriculture. Because of this inexperience, many individuals and groups are "adopting" federal lands ranching allotments in an attempt to reacquaint themselves with rural experiences in much the same manner a suburban organization adopts a highway median. These individuals and groups are attempting to involve themselves and their agendas into the decision making process and the day-to-day management of federal land ranching operations. Many city dwellers have little rural experience, minimal natural resource knowledge, and a lack of appreciation for an area's custom and culture to make sound long-range economic and resource-oriented decisions for an agricultural producer. Ironically, those who adopt these allotments can maintain the easy life by returning to town and all its creature comforts while ranchers must remain to care for the land and livestock.

The impacts of not having ranchers' daily stewardship efforts and their presence on the 16 western federal lands states would have far-reaching effects. Because rural and urban economies are connected, the absence of ranchers on federal land will affect major population centers such as Albuquerque, New Mexico, or Denver, Colorado. Now, to paraphrase Paul Harvey, here is, "The Real Story."

The New Mexico Section Society for Range Management selected four quadrant nominees to be recipients of its prestigious Excellence in Grazing Management awards. Kit and Sherry Laney received one of the awards as recognition from this professional range management organization.

The Laney's are fourth-generation ranchers and co-owners of the Diamond Bar Cattle Company, located in the Gila National Forest, along the Continental Divide of southwestern New Mexico. The Diamond Bar Cattle Company is located north of Mimbres, New Mexico, and is the largest U.S. Forest Service grazing allotment (in the state) at 144,578 acres. This allotment is located entirely in the Gila National Forest. Eighty-five percent of the Laney's' ranching operation falls into two separate wilderness areas: the Gila Wilderness, which was the nation's

first designated wilderness, and the Aldo Leopold Wilderness, named after the man who is recognized as the "Father of Game Management" and who initiated the concept of a societal land ethic for conservation.

The Laney's are management partners of the Diamond Bar Cattle Company who, because of wilderness designations, compete in today's modern high-tech world of computer programs, modems, and forward contract futures using 1800s methods. Special restrictions, resulting from wilderness designations, limit conventionally accepted management practices. More importantly, however, these restrictions preclude the use of *any* motorized mechanical device in wilderness areas except when specifically authorized by the U.S. Forest Service.

Many people of today's generation have no agricultural background and think of Larry McMurtry's epic film, "Lonesome Dove," when they envision ranching. In much the same way as the film, the Laney's spend long days in the saddle in rough, remote country gathering strays and moving cattle, with only occasional help. Many hours are



Kit Laney prepares to haul fencing and water supplies to a job site in the Gila Wilderness with his big team.

Author is Wildlife & Range Resource Specialist, New Mexico Dept. of Agric., Las Cruces, New Mexico.

Editor's Note: A success story for all.

spent packing fencing supplies into otherwise inaccessible areas with mules and pack horses. Salt is hauled to *their cattle in wagons with draft horses. They also have to contend with a myriad of other problems unknown to their predecessors and current day counterparts. These issues include: mitigation measures to protect threatened or endangered species, protection and enhancement of riparian areas, the burgeoning population of elk that compete for forage with cattle and trample fences, watershed conditions including the Clean Water Act, and other resource considerations including dealing with environmental organizations' concerns.*

The Diamond Bar Allotment was first permitted for grazing by the U.S. Forest Service in 1908 and reached a peak of 2,300 animal units year-long in 1924. Through a series of transfers of permit holders, the Laney's acquired the Diamond Bar Allotment from the Federal Intermediate Credit Bank of Houston (Texas) who held the lien on the permit, real property, and chattels late in 1985. Most resources and improvements were in a state of disrepair. Previous permittees of the Diamond Bar Allotment met with limited ranching success overall. Subsequent to designation of these two wilderness areas, most fence and right-of-way construction on the Diamond Bar Allotment has been accomplished without benefit of motorized tools or equipment. Data supplied by the U.S. Forest Service from 1979 to 1992 indicate preferred grazing plants increased by 29 percent, while bare soil decreased 7 percent, largely due to the Laney's management and their commitment to the land, livestock, and lifestyle. U.S. Forest Service data during this same 13 year period indicate 81 percent of the vegetation transects are in an upward or static trend.

The Laney's ride and work in country ranging from 6,000 feet elevation along the East Fork of the Gila River to 10,000 feet at Diamond Peak on the crest of the Black Range of the Gila National Forest. Precipitation varies from an average annual of less than 15 inches in the lower elevations to more than 25 inches at the higher altitudes. They contend seasonally with temperature extremes of -20° to near 100° F. Deep snow, steep trails, and frigid temperatures offer challenges not often met by non-wilderness ranchers when caring for livestock.

Heavy calves in adequate numbers are what make ranchers money. The Laney's have increased weaning weights from 400 pounds to almost 500 pounds per calf after trailing their weanlings 15 miles to a shipping point at Beaverhead, New Mexico. They have increased their calf crop from 50 percent to over 70 percent in six and one-half years, with a future goal of a consistent 80 percent.

A wildland forest fire, known as the Divide Fire, occurred in 1989 along the Upper Diamond Creek drainage of the Diamond Bar Allotment and was followed by heavy rains. The subsequent ash and sediment load deposited in the

creek system by these rains caused almost all the federally endangered Gila trout to die. The surviving trout were rescued and placed in a captive breeding program. Dr. Karl Wood, a New Mexico State University professor specializing in watershed management, has indicated the damaged Upper Diamond Creek has sufficiently recovered to reintroduce captive propagated Gila trout into historic habitat. Dr. Wood feels this watershed recovery was accomplished largely due to many days of persistent hard riding by the Laney's to keep cattle off the succulent regrowth and their deep commitment to the resource.

According to the most recent U.S. Forest Service range analysis, 98 percent of the grazeable acreage within this ranching allotment is in fair or better range forage condition. In April 1993, Gila National Forest, Mimbres District Ranger, Gerald Engel observed, "A major improvement has taken place in riparian condition."

The Laney's consistently reduce per capita consumption of nonrenewable fossil fuels and electricity by using horses, mules, and teams as their main source of daily transportation on the ranch. They make as much as of their personal needs—meat, butter, cheese, clothes, leather goods, and equipment—as possible. Motorized vehicular travel is limited to a trip to town about once every six weeks for staple food items and hardware supplies.

"Due to the nature of managing a wilderness ranch allotment, our annual expenditure for horseshoes and nails has frequently exceeded what we spend on fossil fuels (gasoline, propane, kerosene, and oil)," Kit Laney observed.

Kit and Sherry Laney currently serve as president and secretary, respectively, of the Gila Permittees Association and are active in several other producer organizations in the area.

The Laney's' livestock operation positively affects the overall public perception of the livestock industry by providing a link to the past through wilderness ranching as well as a window to view the future from a historical perspective. They are demonstrating that proper resource stewardship can be a worthwhile and profitable endeavor for individuals, while protecting and promoting natural renewable resources for the public.

The Laney's have steadfastly and tenaciously remained open-minded to suggestions from federal and state agency personnel and other interest groups, while demonstrating a responsible resource stewardship ethic toward a otherwise little-used area of the nation. They have improved an area which has been historically abused and misused, and are contributing to the stabilization of local economies and the states's infrastructure while maintaining the wilderness integrity. By applying a strong work ethic to a sound stewardship and conservation program, the Laney's are exemplary in their efforts of how the American agricultural industry feeds and clothes much of the world.