

# Campbell & Sons Ranch

## Colorado Section SRM 1999 Excellence in Rangeland Conservation Award

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The Campbell & Sons Ranch is a 500 acre family-owned and operated ranch located on the North Fork of the Gunnison River in western Colorado. The ranch lies between the towns of Hotchkiss and Paonia. As part of their ranching operation the Campbells hold a grazing permit on the 9,000 acre West Terror grazing allotment, north of Paonia, on the Gunnison National Forest.

Campbell & Sons Ranch received the 1999 Colorado Section SRM's "Excellence in Rangeland Conservation Award" for their outstanding management of the West Terror grazing allotment. The Campbells run 312 cow/calf pairs on the allotment from June 16 to October 15. In 1996 the Campbells initiated a new management strategy that is based on grazing their cattle as a single herd using time-controlled grazing. This grazing strategy was accomplished by developing seven pastures on the allotment using temporary electric fence, permanent electric fence, standard barbed wire fences and natural barriers and constructing six new spring developments. Pasture moves are based on the frequency that plants are grazed, intensity of grazing and opportunity for

plant growth or regrowth. The grazing periods on the seven pastures vary from 3 to 33 days.

Prior to 1999, the management on the West Terror allotment was typical of many National Forest grazing allotments. Cattle were turned on to the allotment when the low-range vegetation was ready for grazing, usually on June 16. They were moved to higher elevations as the vegetation developed. The cattle stayed on the allotment until

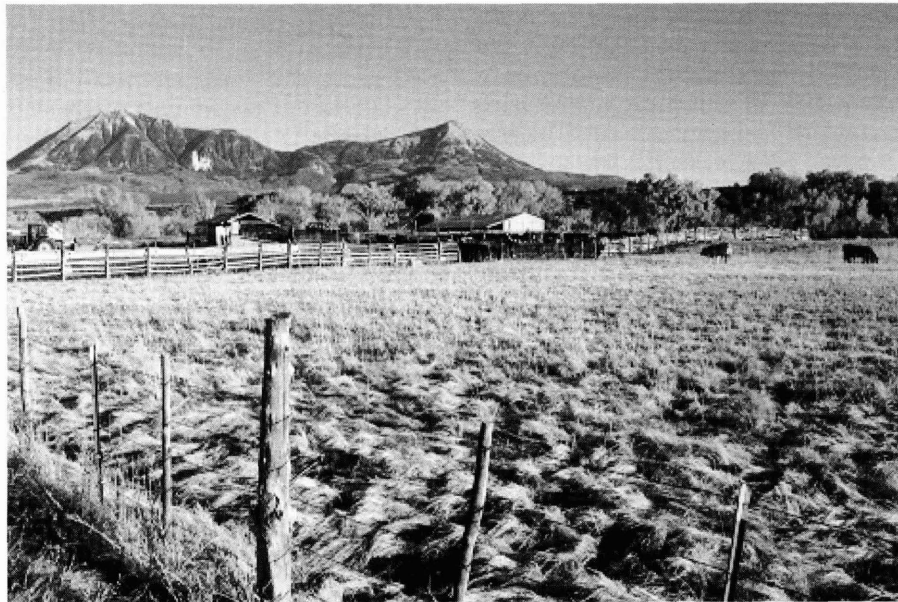
Schools for Ranchers that were sponsored by Colorado State University Cooperative Extension (see related article in this issue). Based on the principles taught in these courses the Campbells and the Forest Service developed the new management strategy.

The change in management in 1996 produced immediate and dramatic improvements. Early grazed pastures were allowed to regrow after grazing and late grazed pastures were allowed to reach

maximum development prior to grazing. Areas that were repeatedly grazed prior to 1995 were grazed only once under the new management. We have observed a continual improvement in conditions from 1996 through 1999.

The change in management and improvement in conditions has been noticed by neighbors and the public. On one piece of private land that borders the West Terror allotment the owners requested that the Campbells graze

the property to improve conditions for wildlife. The owners had originally purchased this oakbrush/aspen property for hunting—mule deer and elk. At the time they purchased the property there had been a grazing lease. The leasee was grazing approximately 90 head of



*Campbell & Sons Ranch located on the North Fork of the Gunnison River—livestock handling facilities. Mt. Lamborn (L) and Lands End Mountain (R) of West Elk Mountains, Gunnison N.F. in background.*

October 16 and were kept scattered by riding, salting and water developments. Management was acceptable but some areas were repeatedly grazed as cattle drifted back to preferred sites resulting in over-use. In 1995 the Campbells attended the first Range Management



*Campbell & Sons Ranch located on North Fork of the Gunnison River—Cattle just coming back to the ranch after grazing on the West Terror allotment, Gunnison N.F. for the summer.*

cow/calf pairs or yearlings from May through September. This type of grazing, allowed the cattle to repeatedly graze preferred sites, resulted in over-use of these areas and caused a decline in conditions. As a result the owners terminated the grazing lease. Over the next few years as the ungrazed vegetation became more overgrown and coarse, the owners noticed that the deer and elk were using their property less and less—resulting in reduced hunting opportunities. However, they noticed on the adjacent West Terror allotment that deer and elk were commonly found grazing on the green regrowth. They asked the Campbells if they would be willing to graze their land in a similar fashion to what they were doing on the West Terror allotment. The Campbells have incorporated this private land property into their grazing rotation. They graze this area with their full herd from June 1 to June 15, just before they turn-on to the National Forest. This early grazing followed by a full summer of rest, allows the vegetation to regrow and provides more palatable, nutritious forage for wildlife. It also provided two weeks of late spring grazing for the Campbells' livestock.

There are four generations of Campbells that live and work on the Campbell & Sons Ranch. The family

has owned the ranch since the late 1880's. The ranch consists of approximately 500 acres of private deeded land and runs 300 cow/calf pairs, 30–40 heifers, and a small herd of bison. The ranch lands are all managed as improved pastures. Irrigation water comes from the North Fork River. The ranch produces 400–450 tons of grass or grass/alfalfa hay per year, in two cuttings. The Campbells have worked at increasing the productivity of their lands by using time-controlled grazing on their private lands as well as on the National Forest. Some pastures are grazed in the spring, hayed one time in the summer and grazed in the fall. Some pastures are hayed twice during the summer and grazed only in the fall. The ranch emphasizes grazing where possible.

The Campbells run primarily Angus/Angus-Hereford-cross cattle. They calve from early February through early April. They wean over 90% of their calves and finish 60% to slaughter. Last fall their steers averaged 610 lbs. at weaning in October. Since initiating the new management the cattle have come off the Forest in better condition than in the past—the cows rate an average of condition class 7.

Like most ranches in the North Fork, the ranch is fairly small. The North Fork valley has been a fruit growing region

since the 1880's. The development of the fruit industry caused much of the valley land to be broken up into small parcels that were practical for fruit-growing. The large, open range livestock operations that are common in many parts of the West are unusual in the North Fork. The Campbells' present operation is actually made up of seven different original homesteads, nearly all of which were in fruit at one time. It is now the largest area of open space between Hotchkiss and Paonia. The demand for land for housing subdivisions is moderate in the North Fork, compared to other parts of Colorado. But even this demand has caused real estate prices to increase. This demand is hampering ranchers from adding additional property to their land base. As a consequence the relationship of the ranch and the adjacent Gunnison National Forest is critical. Without the National Forest grazing allotment, the Campbells would not be able to maintain their operation. This would likely result in the land being broken into smaller parcels, thus reducing open space in the valley as well as the land being used more intensively and probably being maintained in reduced condition. The Campbell Ranch is a good example of the importance of public land grazing permits to privately owned ranches and how these ranches provide open space in the West.

The Campbell & Sons Ranch was recognized by CSSRM for their exemplary management and demonstrating that improved grazing management can be implemented on a moderate sized allotment with moderate investment and produce excellent results.

Authors are Range Conservationist on the Paonia Ranger District, Gunnison National Forest; Range Staff for the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forests; and owners/operators of the Campbell & Sons Ranch, Hotchkiss, Colorado.