

Change On The Range

By Helen Ivy Rowe, Matt Shinderman, and E.T. Bartlett

A Colorado survey looks at what choices public land ranchers would make if faced with potential reductions in available federal forage.

As more and more ranchland is converted to non-agricultural uses every year, ranchers and land managers are increasingly concerned about loss of open space and impacts on ranching communities. Between 1990 and 1999, Colorado farmland declined by 1.3 million acres; 400,000 acres were lost in 1999 alone. In this same decade, the average size of a Colorado farm shrunk by 152 acres (Colo. Dept. of Agr. 2000). In face of such problems we need to look closely at rancher decisions behind these sales. What strategies will ranchers use if faced with federal grazing reductions? How likely is it that public land ranchers will resort to selling their ranches if faced with public policy changes? What alternatives to selling the ranch do

ranchers have? Knowledge of rancher alternatives and preferences can aid in developing strategies that will help ranchers adapt to changing economies and policies.

Western Landscape Is Changing

Western landscapes are currently undergoing some of the most dramatic changes since the settlement of agricultural communities during the opening of the West. The wide-open spaces characterizing the region have drawn millions of visitors and new residents alike. They are now threatened by their own popularity. Mountain gateway community development over the last several decades has increased dramatically to the point where the Intermountain West region is one of the fastest growing regions in the country. With growth has

come rapid and irreversible loss of open space and new challenges for traditional rural communities. Since ranchland is often the primary target for subdivision, ranchers play an important role in this pattern of land use change.

Several external factors influence whether ranchers sell their land or continue ranching, including federal policy measures, local land-use planning efforts, and development of surrounding lands. Many ranchers rely on public land allotments on either BLM or USFS land for part of their ranch operations. Ranchers with a substantial amount of leased public land have the potential to be heavily impacted by changes in federal grazing policy. In a related study (Rowe et al. 2001), personal interviews with ranchers indicated that changes in



Photo by L. Roy Roath

public policies would be an important factor in the decision to sell a ranch.

Ranchers retain ownership because they love the land, the lifestyle, and the opportunity to raise a family in a safe environment where they can instill positive values. Though these motivations are relatively well understood, there is no clear picture that explains how ranchers will react to multiple pressures including growth and federal land policy.

There were two overall objectives for this study. First, we looked at how ranchers would change or diversify their operations if faced with reductions in allowable federal forage. Second, we explored whether ranchers more dependent on ranching for income or ranchers with greater reliance on public grazing would be more vulnerable to policy changes.

Colorado Ranchers Give Input

The study was conducted in Routt and Moffat Counties in northwestern Colorado. These counties were selected based upon their proximity to each other and similar cultural history. Both counties maintain active ranching communities, although pressure for agricultural land conversion has been greater in Routt County.

Public land ranchers were selected from a list of public land grazing permit holders obtained from the USFS and BLM offices in both Routt and Moffat Counties. Thirty-seven ranchers were

interviewed at each rancher's residence. Interviews were based on a three-part survey. Ranchers were asked to describe their responses to reductions in allowable federal forage use in increments of 25, 50, and 100 percent. The survey was based on a previous survey conducted on 1,052 public land permittees across 11 western states (Gentner 1999).

To evaluate the first objective, respondents were asked to select their most likely responses to each level of reduction in federal forage from a list of seven potential responses. Response categories included: 1) continue ranching with no change, 2) sell the ranch, 3) reduce herd size, 4) replace federal forage with other forage, 5) diversify the ranch operations,

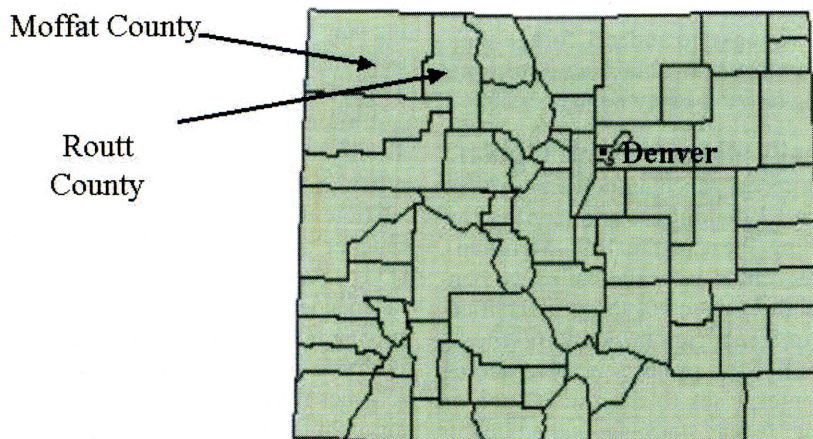
6) seek off-ranch employment, and 7) other. Multiple responses could be selected for each reduction level.

Dependence on ranching for income was established by asking the rancher if they were dependent on ranching for income. Level of dependence on public lands was derived by dividing public AUMs by total AUMs (public, leased, and private AUMs). Responses were divided into three levels of dependence: low (0–33%); moderate (34–66%); and high (67–100%).

Ranchers Don't Want To Sell

In general, ranchers favor finding alternatives to federal forage rather than selling their ranch if faced with reductions in federal forage. Frequently selected alternatives include: reduce herd size, purchase or lease forage from private sources, diversify ranch operations, or seek off-ranch employment to supplement income. Ranchers seem to sell only as a last resort; our data shows a relationship between reduction levels and selected alternatives. Responses to 100% reductions help illustrate this point. If federal forage were eliminated, on one end of the spectrum 26% of the ranchers stated they would have to sell, and at the opposite end 12% would not need to change current operations at all. In between these extremes lie the majority of ranchers. They must make some type of change, but they chose to find an alternative rather than sell their ranch. At 25% and 50% reduction levels this

Map of Colorado



middle ground is even larger.

Ranchers who were reluctant to sell but were forced to compensate for lost public forage chose reducing their herd as the most common response. Ranchers less commonly indicated they would replace federal forage with new forage, although most ranchers doubt that this option is available. Fourteen ranchers (38%) chose finding new forage as an alternative to federal grazing cuts (Figure 1). Specifically, twelve of these ranchers said they would seek more private land to lease. Unfortunately, eleven

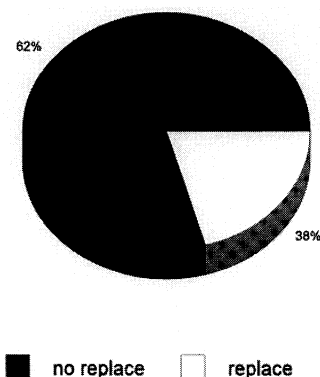


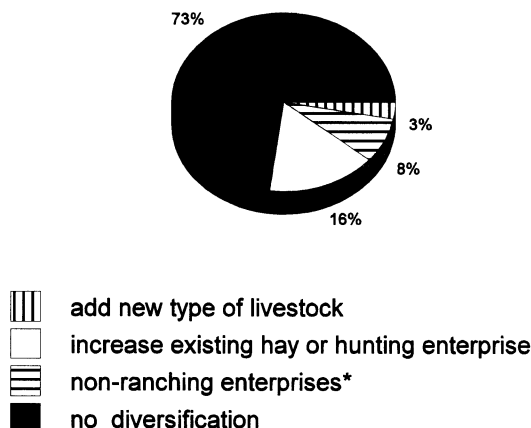
Fig. 1. Percentage of population that chose "Replace federal forage with other forages".

of these twelve indicated that they would be unlikely to find private land to lease. Five of the ranchers indicated that they would like to buy more private land, but again four added that this would be very unlikely. Four of the five ranchers thought they would move more livestock onto private land; two thought this would be a likely scenario. Overall, it seems that although ranchers frequently chose finding alternative forage as their response to federal forage cuts, they realize that obtaining additional grazing resources may not be possible.

Diversification: A Viable Option?

At a recent ranching conference (The Culture, Economics, and Ecology of Ranching West of the 100th Meridian), speakers enthusiastically hailed the benefits and successes of using diversification to keep ranchers in business. Diversification projects involve adding new enterprises to the ranch such as hunting, fishing, farming, and adding or

Diversification Responses



*Non-ranching enterprises include opening a Bed and Breakfast or retreat center, offering "ranch hand" vacations, selling meat through a local coop, raising fish, establishing a vineyard and creating a hunting or fishing business.

Fig. 2. Comparison of 37 Colorado ranchers' selection of diversification alternatives if federal allowable forage were reduced at all levels.

changing to a new type of livestock. Diversification could also involve starting businesses that offer on-ranch vacations or sell honey, fruit, or other products. Ranchers can add value to their existing livestock trade through processing and selling the meat more directly or switching to organic meat production. While these ideas have merit and some proven success, it appears that the concepts addressed are not widely accepted within the ranching community. From ten ranchers that would diversify ranch operations, six ranchers chose to increase their existing hay or hunting enterprises (Figure 2). Only three responses indicated interest in activities outside of ranching related enterprises.

Rowe et al. (2001) found that these same ranchers are motivated to continue ranching primarily because they enjoy raising livestock. Most ranchers agreed that enjoying animal husbandry, ranching way of life and ranch work were important reasons to continue ranching. These findings might explain rancher reluctance to choose diversification among their alternatives. Activities other than ranching may not provide sufficient satisfaction to motivate the rancher to continue. Additionally, the study found that 32 of 37 ranchers rated independence as an important factor for staying in ranching. Allowing more people onto the ranch for diversification schemes runs against the grain of ranching culture. Some ranchers complained

during the interviews that bringing people onto their ranch, even to put them to work, interfered with ranch operations. Putting inexperienced people to work can require more effort than doing these tasks themselves.

It is also possible that few ranchers have been exposed to the ideas of diversification. The interviewer perceived that few ranchers had given diversifying ranch enterprises much thought. In order for ranching support organizations to successfully engage the ranching community in diversification enterprises, ranchers must be informed of the possibilities and shown successful examples. Perhaps education schemes directed at ranchers facing economic stress may convince ranchers to undertake a new enterprise. For some ranchers, diversification projects may need to stay within the bounds of ranching by switching to production, establishing a cooperative local meat packing plant or adding other agriculturally based products such as chickens, bees or fruit orchards.

Pressure To Sell The Ranch: Dependence On Ranching

The study hypothesized that ranchers more dependent on ranching for income would be more heavily impacted by reductions in federal forage than those with little income dependence. However, this study revealed no difference in willingness to sell among groups even at the 100% reduction level. The majority of

respondents in both cases indicated that they would remain on their property.

These results are somewhat surprising. Ranchers continue to ranch despite financial difficulties. They stay because of non-economic factors such as sense of place, attractiveness of lifestyle, family values, and tradition.

Dependence On Public Lands

We would expect ranchers with a high dependence (67–100%) on public lands for their ranch operations to be more heavily impacted by reductions in federal forage than ranchers with low dependence (1–33%) on public forage. Again no difference was found. In reality, this trend may be affected by other factors. In a related study using the same interviews, public dependency was found to be correlated with the length of time a ranch had been within the same family (Rowe et al. 2001). Thus, ranchers who stand the most to lose from federal grazing cuts have more history with the ranch and may be more resistant to selling. Here again, motivations such as attachment to the ranch and the lifestyle it provides may be more important than economic considerations such as loss of forage. Changes in federal grazing policy in this case did not appear to direct a rancher's decision to sell.

Ranchers would prefer to sell the ranch rather than find an off-ranch job. This may be due to the fact that ranchers who consider this option already have such employment. On the other hand, it could reveal the strength of attachment ranchers have to the actual ranch work. They might prefer to sell this ranch and buy another ranch elsewhere rather than leave ranching altogether.

Actual Reductions May Cause Ranchers To Sell

Ranchers in Routt and Moffat Counties are generally reluctant to sell their properties when faced with reductions in allowable forage on public lands. Ranchers expressed a preference to experiment with a wide variety of options in order to avoid selling their land. Dependence on ranching for income and dependency on public land did not affect rancher's decisions to sell.

Given growing numbers of ranch

sales, it is surprising that so few respondents indicated that they would sell their ranch in response to federal grazing cuts. The authors offer two theories that may help explain these responses. First, the questions are based on hypothetical reductions in allowable forage. In these interviews, ranchers could perhaps answer more optimistically how they think they would deal with reductions. Some may find the prospect of selling their ranch so appalling that they do not wish to acknowledge this possibility. If confronted with actual cuts, responses may change.

Another possible explanation is the mistrust many ranchers feel for the federal government and its policies. There is a longstanding tension between ranchers and federal agencies, particularly in the West. Ranchers often view federal policy changes as an attempt to deprive them of land and livelihood and react with anxiety and skepticism towards federal involvement in their land use decisions. It is possible that reactions to reductions in allowable forage may be influenced by these emotions whereby a reluctance to sell may indicate a refusal to allow the federal government to impact their lives and denial that federal policy changes can alter a rancher's lifestyle.

For policy makers and citizens concerned about the rate of land use conversion, understanding the basis for rancher decisions in face of hardship such as federal forage reductions is critical. Cuts in livestock numbers and leasing more private land have been chosen as alternatives, but these are more costly and will decrease ranch profit. Many suggest that ranchers should diversify ranch enterprises to augment profits, but the ranchers interviewed indicate low acceptance of these ideas.

American Farmland Trust (2000) recommends that the public should be educated about the importance of public lands to maintain traditional ranching in Colorado and advocates state policies that avoid unnecessary subdivision of rangeland and decreasing competitiveness of livestock production. Additionally, the American Farmland Trust (2000) suggests increasing public land grazing, funneling more GOCO (The Great Outdoors Colorado Trust Fund) funds for acquiring ranchland

conservation easements, ending federal mortgage interest deductions for recreational homes (to slow development of new homes), and allowing local jurisdictions to increase plot sizes (to slow subdivision of lands). If grazing on public lands is reduced, this data suggests that the majority of ranchers will make some adjustments. Alternatives now available to ranchers seem inadequate to cope with the problem; thus, additional policies may be necessary for ranchers to stay in business.

References

- American Farmland Trust. 2000.** The last roundup? How public policies facilitate rural sprawl and the decline of ranching in Colorado's mountain valleys. 19 p.
- Garner, E. H. and J. B. Eckert. 1999.** Cost of living differences in Colorado: a summary of county-level estimates for 1998. Department of Agricultural Economics, Colorado State University Cooperative Extension. <http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/CoopExt/PUBS/CONSUMER/xcm211.html>.
- Gentner, B. 1999.** Characteristics of public land grazing permittees. Masters Thesis. Dept. of Agri. and Res. Econ., Oregon State Univ., Corvallis, Ore.
- Howe, J., E. McMahon, and L. Probst. 1997.** Balancing nature and commerce in gateway communities. Island Press, Washington, D.C.
- Huntsinger, L. and P. Hopkinson. 1996.** Viewpoint: sustaining rangeland landscapes: a social and ecological process. *J. of Range Manage.* 49(2):167–173.
- Redmond, J. T., E. T. Bartlett, P. Gutierrez and V. G. Carande. 1992.** Costs of grazing on federal lands and private leases: a 1991 Colorado comparison. Dept of Rangeland Ecosystem Science, Colorado State Univ, Cooperative Extension. 28 p.
- Riebsame, W. E. 1997.** Atlas of the New West. WW Norton & Company, New York, NY.
- Rowe, Helen Ivy, E.T. Bartlett, and L. Swanson. 2001.** Ranching motivations in two Colorado counties. *J. of Range Manage.* 54(4): in press.
- Smith, A. J. and W. E. Martin. 1972.** Socioeconomic behavior of cattle ranchers with implications for rural community development in the west. *Amer. J. Agr. Econ.* 54:217–225.
- Starrs, P. 1998.** Let the cowboy ride: cattle ranching in the American West. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, Md.

Authors are research assistants and professor, Department of Rangeland Ecosystem Science, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado 80523.