

# Maintaining Viable Farms and Ranches Adjacent to National Forests for Future of Wildlife and Open Space

## Part 1: The History of The Problem

By Jack Ward Thomas and Stephanie Lynn Gripne

**A**lthough some credit Will Rogers, famous author and humorist Mark Twain is most often noted for giving the following investment advice to a young man “Buy land—they ain’t making any more of it.” That was sound wisdom then, and it is sound wisdom now.

But, he didn’t know the half of it. As population and per capita income simultaneously increased and land available for development decreased, the demand and price for land has increased faster than most of us can believe. Consequently, the face of the American West is rapidly changing as suburbs, “ranchettes,” and hobby ranches spread across the landscape.

No matter how we twist and turn, we cannot help but believe that those who care about the changing character of the West are on the cusp of a crisis that could, over the next several decades, dramatically and negatively impact everything from open space, farms, and ranches, to wildlife, fisheries, soils, plants, and watersheds. Must this happen? Probably, but most of these effects can be dampened.

While development and loss of wildlife habitat and open space is a question of more general concern, we focus our attention on social and ecological issues related to the interface between private ranchlands and public lands. Given the experience of the senior author, (10 years with a state fish and wildlife department and 30 years in the Forest Service—27 years as a research scientist dealing with range and wildlife issues and 3 years as Chief) we further confine our discussion to the interface between private ranchlands and national forests.

Likewise, while the habitat of hundreds of species of wildlife are potentially at stake, we concentrate our dis-

cussion on mule deer and elk since these are species of great public interest for both hunting and viewing.

We examine the interface between private ranchlands and national forests in two parts. In Part 1, we provide a brief narrative and history about the interactions between these land ownerships as they affect both economic and ecological relationships, specifically mule deer and elk migration. In Part 2, we discuss methods of social/political adjustment to produce the radical middle “win-win-win” outcomes among ranchers, conservationists, and wildlife in the New West.

### Elk, Mule Deer, and the Interface

How are elk and mule deer affected by the interface between ranches and national forests? Every fall, as snow accumulates in the high country of the national forests, elk and mule deer must move down onto their ancestral wintering grounds to survive. In the recent past, Euro-Americans arrived upon the scene and altered these wintering grounds to meet their needs and those of their livestock.

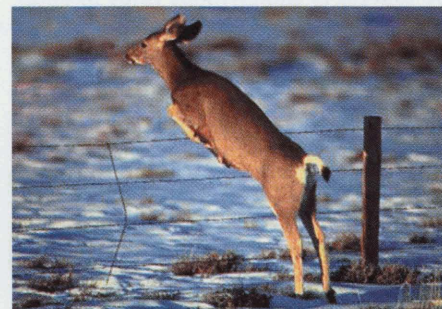
Barbed wire fences now cross migration routes from the high country to wintering grounds. When the deer and elk arrive on wintering grounds, they commonly find only stubble left by the livestock on the south and west slopes of foothills that are blown free of snow, or the snow is melted by the sun. There is also only stubble on the meadows where the rancher raises hay and stacks it for winter-feeding of livestock. As the snow deepens and the temperatures drop, more elk and mule deer appear on the wintering grounds. No matter their physical condition when they arrive, they have begun to starve. It is always a

question of which will come first, death or spring.

The elk jump the rancher’s fences when they are calm. They run through fences when excited. And, seemingly, sooner or later, they inevitably get excited. The mule deer jump the fences. But, as the snow deepens and their physical condition deteriorates, more fail to clear the fences and end up hanging from the tangled top two wires.

Finding little but stubble on which to feed, they gradually overcome fear and eagerly share hay or other feed distributed by the rancher to livestock. The rancher ordinarily does not complain—at least vociferously—accepting that, after all, the deer and elk were there first and most ranchers love the wild things as they love their land. But, the wintering deer and elk are not evenly distributed across the private ranches that border the national forests and some ranchers suffer the negative impacts of wintertime ungulate wildlife residents far in excess of their neighbors and receive little or no compensation.

A complaint to the Forest Service (FS) falls upon sympathetic ears but engenders no help. The animals are not on national forests and the wildlife belongs to



*Jumping fence is just one small adjustment mule deer have had to make as the land becomes increasingly fragmented (Photo courtesy of Steven Holt).*

the State who has jurisdiction over their management. A call to the state wildlife agency will usually produce a visit or visits from a biologist or law enforcement officer who will do what they can to alleviate the problem. In some states this takes the form of some payment for "damage," which are commonly token in nature.

Sometimes harassment will be undertaken to force the animals back onto public land or to disperse them more widely. The relief from such actions is usually fleeting at best and places increased stress on the animals at the very time when their energy reserves are being depleted.

Both the aggravation and costs to the rancher, which build along with increased numbers of deer and elk – and keeps on year after year – combines with other factors to whittle away at the resolve to continue ranching. Often, that is simply the way it is. But, does it have to be that way? Is there a better way – a middle ground, a path not yet explored?

## **The Public and Private Interface**

The West faces unique land ownership issues. In fact, a property map of the West shows a glaringly obvious mixture of public and private land. However, these lands are not only linked by their proximity on the landscape, they are inextricably linked by over a century of intertwined social and economic considerations.

We refer to the boundary of private ranchlands and national forests as the interface and are interested in this region because no other area offers as much potential to conserve wildlife habitat and open space, and no other areas are at greater risk. While this interface has provided critical wildlife habitat and open space in the past, this may not be the case for long since private lands are also the most highly sought after lands for development.

No treatise on land use in the West would be complete without consideration of the dynamics of management related to the interface between private and public land. Any effort to define and address land use in the "New West" that ignores this obvious, but poorly under-

stood interface, with all of its ramifications, is no more than an academic exercise.

Farmers and, particularly, ranchers historically have played a critical role in what goes the interface. Fortunately, for those concerned about the loss of open space and wildlife, most private landowners continue to play this role.

Author Ivan Doig said that while most of us live on the land there are those who are of the land—rooted there as surely as the trees and bunch grasses. Those "of the land" have maintained their way of life—even over generations—when it would make more economic sense to sell out to land speculators and subdividers. The relatively undeveloped state of the land was assured by their determination to maintain a way of life and hang onto the land they held in trust.

These ranchers and farmers can maintain that stubborn attachment to the land only so long as their operations are at least marginally economically viable. The maintenance of anything approaching the present state of the interface between private ranchlands and national forests depends on the economic and social viability of both family owned and corporate farms and ranches. Clearly, when those farms and ranches are no longer economically and socially viable, the siren call of the subdividers and developers will grow ever more seductively sweet.

## **National Forests and Grazing History**

Wherever there are large blocks of federal lands managed by the Forest Service (FS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), there will also be private ranches adjoining these lands. Owners of these adjacent ranches typically lease grazing rights from the federal government. Grazing privileges on national forests have been associated with these ranches for nearly a century. Hence, the national forests are part and parcel of the ranching operation and a well-established part of local cultures.

One of the FS's first tasks of the in the early 1900's was to bring unrestricted grazing under regulation, impose reasonable fees for that grazing (Congress

now sets the fees), and gain political support from grazing interests for management actions necessary to begin to recover overgrazed ranges and to reduce conflicts between ranchers. This was accomplished by coupling grazing permits for the national forests with ranches (i.e. base property) that abutted the national forests. Over the years, it became customary for these grazing permits to be transferred to new owners along with the base property to which they were connected.

The intent was to promote social and economic stability for local areas in keeping with the instructions from Secretaries of Agriculture Hitchcock and Wilson (1901 and 1905). More to the point, Gifford Pinchot, the first Chief of the FS, clearly understood that it was essential to "cut a deal" with ranchers using forest reserves if the forest reserves were to remain in existence.

Such a long-standing arrangement, spanning nearly 100 years, cannot and should not be casually disregarded – legally, economically, socially, or ethically. This arrangement has not precluded changes in permitted livestock numbers, installation of grazing systems, water developments, or other requirements for continuing improvements related to the grazing operations. Such changes became routine over the past century and are ongoing.

The next significant piece of legislation relating to rangelands was the Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act of 1960. The Multiple-Use Sustained Yield Act Stated, "It is the policy of Congress that the National Forests are established and shall be administered for outdoor recreation, range, timber, watershed, and wildlife and fish purposes..." Range was and is interpreted as inclusive of livestock grazing; hence livestock grazing on national forests was again validated by the law.

More recently ecosystem management, a mandate adopted by the FS, provides a new framework to examine the interactions of the interface between private ranchlands and national forests. Ecosystem management, in its most simple definition, is nothing more than treating ecosystems as to maintain sustainability—ecologically, economically,



and socially. In fact, some managers would say that ecosystem management is more about people than anything else. Not surprisingly, implementation of the concepts of ecosystem management seems more limited by social, economic, and political factors than by any lack of scientific information on ecological function.

### **Ecosystem Management – The Latent Phase**

A full examination of the interactions of the management of the national forests and adjacent private ranchlands is an appropriate aspect of the rather recently adopted (1991) ecosystem management mandate for the National Forests. Ecosystem management has been defined as being inclusive of human needs and desires and takes place within the framework of laws, culture, and agreements. Furthermore, this approach requires considerations of broader (i.e., across political boundaries) scales.

In most cases the national forests are mountainous in landform while adjacent private ranchlands are at lower elevations with more gentle terrain, better watered, and have higher ecological levels of productivity. Taken together, the ranching operation that involves grazing on national forests is more apt to be a viable economic enterprise than the private ranchlands would be standing alone. Hence, an economically viable ranch is much less vulnerable to the enticements of conversion to subdivision.

The recognized challenge of implementing ecosystem management include, in what we consider their order of importance: public confidence, scales of time and space (this is where cross boundary consideration come to bear), transfer of information, and uncertainty. All of these factors can and are (knowingly or unknowingly) addressed by successful collaborative groups.

One recipe for achieving success collaborating in natural resources management is as follows:

1. Obtain and synthesize high quality information.
2. Recruit knowledgeable people representing stakeholders at the appropriate geographic scale.
3. Provide opportunities to interact and explore and provide incentives to find solutions.
4. Enable solution implementation so as to facilitate mobilization of resources, sharing ownership, adaptive adjustments and ability to change values as knowledge increases.
5. Mix items 1–4, make sure adequate resources are available, and then, stay out of the way.

### **Collaboration – Back to the Future**

Barbara Gray defines collaboration as “the pooling of resources by multiple stakeholders to solve a set of problems.” Collaboration is becoming more popular as a means for solving problems along the interface between private lands and the national forests. However, collabora-

tion is not a panacea. Sometimes the magic works and sometimes it doesn't.

One of the most challenging aspects of collaboration is doing so within the boundaries of the laws. Agencies like the BLM and FS must follow the applicable laws and often times are the managers responsible for implementing decisions. Therefore, inclusion of the agencies who can put the legal sideboards on a collaborative decision making process is needed from the very beginning, if the collaboration is to be successful.

Although collaboration is a long-term high investment process, the alternative is to live with the consequences of blind adherence to existing processes driven by government regulations and regulators that has been inevitably plagued by conflict.

In Part 1, we have defined the private ranchland and national forest interface, illustrated how this interface affects mule deer and elk, and demonstrated the long ecological and sociological history of the private ranchland and national forest interface. In Part 2 (found on page 13), we discuss the current state of the private ranchland and national forest interface and how we can use ecosystem management to work towards the radical center to support both wildlife and open space.

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