

GUEST opinion *Beef, wilderness, environmentalism and the need for a new land designation*

Since 1996, almost 11,000 ranch units have gone out of business annually. The result of those departures continues to have serious implications on communities and lives of citizens within the industry.

University of Wisconsin law professor Peter Carstensen has recently written, "Food animal husbandry requires substantial expenditures. If you're not going to be compensated for that, your incentive as a farmer to produce the quality just isn't there."

The fact is, if there is persistent antagonism and economic constraints in any business, the outcome will be chronic contraction and such contraction will be manifested in any number of areas. Ranching is no different and it may be the most vulnerable of the husbandry industry components.

In legend and worldwide fascination, the West was once home to the American beef supply. It was never the major supplier of feed grain production, nor was it the geographic area of most consistent resource abundance, but it was where the ranching industry evolved into its modern form.

During the last half of the 20th century, there was a continental shift in the business with an axis running north from Texas acting as the fulcrum point of the shift. Environmentalists argue that the shift was a move toward conditions more like European lands where cattle evolved. That is only conditionally correct, but it is also a convenient condemnation of the beef industry of the West.

From Texas eastward, European conditions are matched only by rainfall. The heat, humidity, and parasitical conditions of the new frontier in the American beef industry are not at all like conditions in Europe where cattle evolved. The industry has excelled because entrepreneurs have been allowed to shape their playing field with long-term investments and strategies. They learned to deal with their conditions by writing the play book preached by environmental elitism. They used managed science and its manifestation, evolution, in making their cattle fit un-European conditions.

The environmental management of federal lands

The movement of cattle from the West is not a universal migration, but it is a stepwise migration from federal lands and lands where federal ownership dominates the holdings. Where concentration of private ownership exists in places like eastern New Mexico, eastern Colorado, eastern Wyoming, and eastern Montana, cattle numbers fluctuate largely on the basis of drought and or market conditions. It is in the areas of domination of federal ownership of lands that the big differences occur.

Local information justifies concern of that persistent trend. For example, in the Gila National Forest in south-western New Mexico, cattle numbers are down more than 50 percent since 1970. Studies done by New Mexico State University indicate that those decreases are not driven by any drought or market indices. Rather, they are driven by Forest Service management which includes fire and wilderness policies.

The wilderness influence

It was in the Gila that the wilderness movement started. In 1924, without congressional approval, the first wilderness, the Gila Wilderness, was created by the regional Forest Service office. When that wilderness was finally made official by Congress in the Wilderness Act of 1964, there remained 24 active allotments in the wilderness or along that wilderness core. By the mid '80s, 12 of those allotments had been fully destocked and the other 12 had been destocked a whopping 87 percent. Again, there was no drought or market index tied to those management actions by the Forest Service, but there was a very active environmental and wilderness movement presence.

Grazing may be allowed where it existed in 1964 in the law, but cattle reductions were done systematically in the Gila. More often than not, vacated allotments were transferred to neighboring allotments only with allowance for the existing AUMs on the neighboring allotment. As a result, total allotment numbers declined and the downward slide of total cattle numbers continued unabated.

As cattle numbers declined, loan collateral diminished, the ability to capitalize evaporated, and costs increased relative to the land/cow ratios, a downward spiral expanded over once cattle-dominated lands. Families struggled and were divided and children left without a ranch future. The Gila, once a gem among the production areas of New Mexico, became a sterile, brushed up tangle of environmentalism.

If wilderness was not the cause of the transformation in the Gila and elsewhere, it can be argued that it represents the genesis of the modern environmental movement. As such, wilderness must earn yet another Gold Standard as the historical marker that accelerated that movement and the subsequent demolition of the beef industry in too much of the West.

From forests to desert grasslands

The Gila is but an example of the same dismantling of the industry across the West. Operations became progressively less capable of dealing with changing conditions. A simple example is ranch infrastructure. Fencing on much of the West's federal lands has not been updated since original pasture fencing was installed. Some of that work was done now over 80 years ago. As a result, a whole host of consequences have arisen. That issue alone has spiraled into other managerial shortcomings.

These same shortcomings don't apply to competitors where there is freedom to invest in long-term improvements. Dr. Carstensen's writings start to make sense when he warned about the need for incentives to be ongoing in order for the husbandry and any and all industries to remain strong. That freedom has never really existed in much of the West and the displacement of industries has been the result.

The trickle-down effect has had serious consequences. It has also contributed to the fact that 19 of the 20 most at-risk counties in the entire United States exist where this domination of the federal and environmental influences have combined to manage lands.

One of those at-risk counties, Luna County, NM, may well have a federal noose tightened yet more tightly around its neck. Along its eastern boundary, New Mexico Democratic Sens. Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall have introduced legislation to create more designated wilderness.

The Organ Mountains—Desert Peaks Wilderness Act will result in the highest level of restrictions for ranchers like Luna County's Bill Smyer. Smyer has been told that the legislation will allow the continued grazing of cattle on lands he ranches, but while his Texas counterparts will be expanding water distribution systems and running pipelines on four wheelers, Smyer will be expected to survey any existing pipelines he has on foot or horseback. If he ever wants to expand a water system, it must pass through an extensive process that evaluates least intrusive practices.

"The problem is I can't find anywhere where a new wilderness water project has been allowed," Smyer admits.

It is also the first step in a series of debilitating constraints that untold counterparts to Smyer have faced with wilderness designation. The difference is that most of his counterparts have not faced the reality of 100 degree days and limited water sources in the desert.

"This is a nightmare waiting to happen," he concludes.

The alternative and to the future

It is little wonder that those who have duties, responsibilities, and investments on lands designated as wilderness have a very biased view toward congressional action of designating yet more. Isn't it time to alter the course of this social tragedy? Isn't it time to rethink the truth of what Aldo Leopold implied when he suggested that true stewardship comes only from professional managers and land owners "too poor to pay for their sport"?

If there was a land designation that could be conceived that maintains open space into perpetuity, enhances conditions that actually improved range conditions, maintains the right for Americans to have ethical access forever, and elevates the social structure of rural communities in the West, wouldn't that be an environmentally sound concept? More importantly, wouldn't that be an ethically sound concept?

If designated wilderness is expected to be enduring, it needs to remain in its truest form. It must also exist in spite of man's presence. If it has to be coddled and manipulated, it isn't wilderness. It must also exist without expanding influences that pose national security concerns.

It is incumbent on congressional leadership to immediately halt actions that destroy the livelihood and well-being of American communities. Regardless of how much they perceive that somebody might enjoy the outcome of their actions, the destruction of a single legitimate American enterprise must stop. Wasn't that what the framers had in mind when they were emphatic about the limitations of this government in the hands of men?

The American West needs a new land designation. The American West needs a champion in Washington that recognizes that fact. The future is too expansive to allow idealism to continue to triumph over reality. If the American model is to survive, leaders must emerge who will not be complicit in the destruction of an industry that has grown from a primary, productive demand. After all, not all industries display the same doggedness and outright unwillingness to die as does the beef business. — **Stephen L. Wilmeth**

[Stephen L. Wilmeth is a rancher from southern New Mexico. He is one of the "Five Angry Ranchers" who have battled against more designated wilderness on the Mexican border. "Environmentalism on our border has put us all in jeopardy. If anybody is in doubt, consider this fact. The Mexican border in Arizona is now the most dangerous border in the world, and that danger has come not from private property, but from lands of federal ownership and management."]