

Statement regarding proposed Wilderness and NCA designations in Dona Ana
County, New Mexico.
6 August 2007

I have attended several of the Public Input Meetings concerning the Regional Land Management Plan. As I listened to the presentations I was impressed by the passion of all who spoke. The original plan put forth by Senator Domenici had been tabled as the result of proposed changes to some of the properties. That original plan concerned designated land which had previously been classified as Wilderness Study Area (WSA) being redefined as Wilderness. The plans being discussed at these meetings concerned this original plan along with a significant "public citizen" request for additional acreage.

I thought back to my own particular involvement with the process and even to earlier challenges. In the early 1940s the U.S. Department of the Army condemned, appraised, and appropriated over 92% of my Grandfather's ranch, the San Augustine, which sits on the east side of the Organ Mountains. At that time we were at war and this was viewed as necessary for the national defense. In 1981 the BLM reclassified a substantial amount of the remaining BLM lease land as WSA. In 1993 they reclassified a second significant portion of the land as WSA. I don't know exactly how this designation has improved, saved, or protected the lands involved. The areas involved are on the slopes of the Organ Mountains and go upward to the summit of the mountains.

My experiences since this designation have not been good. I have made requests to develop more watering sources in the designated area, but those requests never move forward, because "it would disrupt the ecology of the area".

Despite the fact that the ranch built and has maintained most of the trails in the area for well over a hundred years, we are discouraged from doing so now. For the last 40 or 50 years we have maintained these trails with picks, shovels, and chain saws. Now the use of chain saws is not acceptable.

A few years back the BLM decided that due to public input that they would build an enclosure fence around the Aguirre Spring campground. The reasons were that the cattle were a disturbance to the campers and that the cow manure was a nuisance. I protested and asked that at a minimum they build a passageway through the campground to allow cattle to reach the slopes above the campground. The enclosure cut off access by cattle to a large drainage area above the campground. The result is that an enclosure of a quarter to a half of a section has effectively stopped the grazing of over a section of land above it. In one area on the northern end of the WSA, there is a "fair weather" spring called the Cleofas. The BLM determined that the Cleofas represented a riparian area in need of protection. They built a box around the spring and a pipeline out to a watering trough. Then they fenced off the spring area. This enclosure turned out to be significantly larger than just the spring area because it is also an area of archeological significance. The system doesn't work well. There will be water in the bottom of the canyon, but not enough water in the box to fill the pipeline. The consequence is that we have lost the use

of the water for cattle except in those rare instances when the spring box is full enough to feed the waterline.

I enumerate these things not to complain about them but to make a point. I don't see how designating these areas as WSA have protected or preserved them. Exlosures certainly are not "natural". They do not maintain a pristine state. I do see that it has been a significant burden on us as the lease-holder to continue our operations. It is one thing to want to protect something for the benefit of future generations, but we should consider those who live on and tend those lands on a daily basis. I believe that the love of the land and the passion to protect it is much stronger in those of us who live on and derive a living from these lands. These WSA and now the proposed Wilderness designations will further hamper our ability to conduct our business.

For years the BLM has overseen these properties and the properties have done well. What do we have to gain by changing this system? I believe that you should do more to support our stewards. I appreciate the opinion expressed by one man at the Anthony meeting who voiced his strong desire to preserve and protect these lands. But I think those who live on the land and "live off" the land have the stronger motivation. An analogy might be that "it takes a village to raise a child", but that village will never share the love and dedication to protect that child that a parent will.

These lands are federal property and as such cannot be sold or developed without the approval of the federal government. In the case of the Organ Mountains the land is under the control and supervision of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The BLM has many management tools available to them to protect these lands and should be compelled to administer these lands. I don't believe that we need yet another layer of bureaucracy to accomplish that protection. We don't need more laws, we need to enforce what we have on the books and that is how I see this issue.

I am opposed to the Wilderness and the NCA designations for these properties in Dona Ana County. I would prefer that they be withdrawn and revert to more traditional BLM control as designated by FLMPA (Federal Land Management Policy Act).

Mark Cox, DVM
President, San Augustine Ranch Inc.