

home:
subscribe
today's page 1
contact us
search

western Perspective

insight and analysis

Headwaters

News engages our readers in a different issue every other Wednesday.

We encourage you to [send us your comments](#). Your email must contain your name.

on this page:
column
post a comment
readers respond
archives

Send this page to a friend or colleague

[Read the rest of White's columns](#)

[Read Western Perspective](#)

[Read past Perspectives](#)

[Read the Interior Secretaries series](#)

Western Perspective is sponsored by:



A West that works

Healthy profits



Jack Hagelstein manages his ranch near Roswell, N.M., for more grass, less bare dirt, more grass and a cattle operation that pays.

A New Mexico ranch couple first decided the health of the range was their top priority, but fat cattle and fatter bottom lines followed

By Courtney White for Headwaters News

When Jack and Pat Hagelstein bought the Comanche Hills Ranch a few miles due east of Roswell, N.M., they had two "radical" goals in mind: manage for the health of the land, not simply stocking rate, and make a profit.

Of course, "radical" is not a word Hagelstein would use himself. A former rancher who, as a young man, went into the real estate business, Hagelstein is conservative in his philosophy and businesslike in his approach to ranching. His decisions are deliberate, carefully researched and focused on the bottom line.

The bottom line, in this case, being healthy land.

"It's all about integrity," said Hagelstein, "in family matters, in business, and on the land."

In fact, the Hagelsteins view themselves as a land "healers" – restoring ecological integrity to land through management of their cattle. In five years the Comanche Hills ranch has seen a reduction in the amount of bare soil visible and an increase in the density and variety of grass. Hagelstein has watched lots of juvenile plants get started and the quantity of vegetative litter increase – all positive indicators of land health.

"The ranch was in good condition when we bought it," Hagelstein said. "But I knew it could get better."

A recent Rangeland Health assessment by the Bureau of Land Management – half of the ranch is public land – confirmed the upward trend.

"He is meeting all 17 of the Rangeland Health indicators that we use," said John Spain, the BLM range conservationist for the area, "plus four we added for wildlife and endangered species."

And Hagelstein continues to meet these targets although the ranch received only five inches of rain last year.



Courtney

White writes a monthly column for Headwaters News that focuses on people who embrace a sustainable approach to western resources.

White is executive director of the Quivira Coalition, a Santa Fe-based group devoted to collaboration as the approach to an ecologically healthy region.

Much of Quivira's emphasis is on ranching, but its principles of education, cooperation and innovation apply to many of the region's biggest issues.

[comment on this column](#)

"His management is definitely contributing to the health of the range, and he had standing forage even in a bad year," Spain said.

Hagelstein uses a slightly different indicator. Instead of the usual bare ground, he's got weeds and grass all the way up to the edge of his water troughs.

"The other day in Sunday school someone prayed for rain," he said. "But I thought: 'we live in a desert' – why not steward instead what the good Lord gave us?"

Yesterday

Born in Lubbock, Hagelstein's family moved to eastern Colorado where his mother taught school and his father ranched. When he was halfway through high school, the family packed up and moved to a farm near Hobbs, N.M.

Bitten by the "ag" bug, Hagelstein majored in economics in college before returning to ranching in Colorado, where he worked for seven years, living the good life.

All that changed upon the dissolution of the family farm. Suddenly without a career, Hagelstein decided to try his hand at real estate. He earned a license, bought an apartment building, met and married Pat, a speech therapist, and started a family that now includes five children. After a period of tough times, the financial outlook brightened and the Hagelsteins expanded their apartment holdings.

But the call of ranching gnawed at Hagelstein. When the family achieved a financial target in 1996, he began to look for a ranch to buy. He didn't consider it a big career leap.

"We managed the apartments like they were a ranch," he said. "We grew slowly, watched our debt, managed responsibly, and hired good people."

Integrity and honesty were the keys to their success, he said. Their profit came from buying apartments "wholesale," fixing them up so they were attractive places to live and then selling them "retail."

He intended to apply the same business "added value" philosophy to cattle ranching.

This would prove harder than it sounded. After searching fruitlessly for a few years, the Hagelsteins spied an ad for a ranch in a newspaper and drove to Roswell to take a look. They made an offer on the place the next day. By the winter of 1999 he had 170 head of cattle on the ranch – and a problem on his hands.

"I jumped in with both feet," he said, "and quickly found out that 20 years proved to be a long time to be out of the business."

By chance, Hagelstein read about the Quivira Coalition in American Cowboy magazine and decided to investigate. He came to a tour of Jim Winder's ranch in 2000 and liked what he heard about controlling the timing, intensity and frequency of cattle impact upon the land. He went home and bunched his cattle into one herd and began moving them every two to three weeks through the ranch's eight pastures. To control them, he decided to haul water rather than build new fences. It wasn't just the cost of new fencing.

"When this was open country, the animals didn't stay in one place if there wasn't any feed. They moved on," he said.

Through Quivira workshops, Hagelstein met Kirk Gadzia, a range specialist and educator, who helped the family develop a grazing plan, and rancher Guy Glosson, who teaches low-stress livestock handling methods. Both became mentors to the Comanche Hills Ranch.

With their help, Hagelstein began to watch the ground carefully and almost immediately began to notice improvement. He attributes the upward trend to two management methods: the rest he gives the land; and animal impact.

Pastures are rested from livestock grazing at least 75 percent of the year. Animal impact is natural, too.

"It's nature's way of tilling the soil," he said.

There was an additional bonus to watching land heal: "I'm getting paid to do it," he says with a smile.

Today

In a time when ranchers, especially those on public land, are struggling to stay economically viable, Hagelstein has a business plan that is profitable.

"We trade cattle," he said, "buying low and selling high." They buy yearlings at the local sale barn, fatten them up on the ranch and then sell them for a profit. Hagelstein rotates cattle through his herd sometimes as often as three times a year, depending on a calculation that Hagelstein uses to determine the right time to sell.

"Our costs are low, and I don't have to maximize capacity to make a profit," he said. He summarized his business philosophy this way: "You make your profit when you buy, not when you sell."

Using this plan, the Hagelsteins tripled the size of their operation in two years. They sell a truckload of cattle every two weeks. They are buying an additional ranch to boot. It has 64 acres of irrigated ground, which Hagelstein intends to divide into 50 paddocks with electric fencing so he can control the rotation of his animals tightly. He says he got the idea from Sam Montoya, a rancher on Sandia Reservation, north of Albuquerque.

The rest of the new ranch, 1,500 acres, is BLM land, and Hagelstein intends to use it literally to let his animals rest. "Recess" is what he calls it – a place for the animals to play.

"I devote a lot of my time to taking stress off of the cattle," said Hagelstein. "Stress makes them sick, just like it does with humans. The difference is, they can't tell you when they're feeling stressed out."

A lack of stress in their relationship with the BLM is a key part of the Hagelstein's success to date. This lack of stress works in both directions.

"Jack has been extremely good to work with," said John Spain, "He is extremely cooperative."

This relationship was put to an unexpected test, however, in 2001 when the BLM discovered a patch of critically endangered Pecos sunflowers on the ranch.

"Jack's response was great," Spain said. "In cooperation with the BLM, the pasture was cross-fenced to allow the area to be deferred during the critical growth period for the sunflower."

"I didn't mind," Hagelstein said. "In fact, I took it as a challenge that I wanted to meet."

The Hagelstein's cooperation with the BLM recently produced another benefit. A Cooperative Management Plan was completed and signed last fall which allows them to graze numbers above their permit levels, within an established limit, without prior approval by the BLM.

In fact, according to Hagelstein, the Comanche Hills Ranch has enjoyed a 150 percent increase in permitted AUMs (Animal Unit Months – or the amount of forage a mother cow and her calf can consume in one month) to 3,600.

The flexibility offered by the BLM is unusual, to say the least. "He's one of the very few we've done this with," said Spain.

In response to the increase in AUMs, Hagelstein reduced the mother cow herd numbers and grazed a larger number of yearlings during the dormant (winter) season.

It increased his bottom line as well.

Given the amount of grass Jack and Pat have grown recently – Jack figures the ranch has enough grass now for two years even if the rains quit tomorrow – it is likely that Hagelsteins will continue to enjoy the fruits of their labor for many years to come.

Hopefully, their blending of the "radical" goals of healthy land and healthy profits will not be seen as so unusual for long.

[join the discussion](#) | [readers respond](#)

[back to top](#) | [to page 1](#)
[send this page to a friend](#)

produced by Greg Lakes, editor
and Shellie Nelson, assistant editor
contents copyright 2004 | Headwaters News

Headwaters News is a project of the
Center for the Rocky Mountain West
at the University of Montana.