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"What we are trying to do here is demonstrate how the integration of conservation and sustainable agricultural practices can improve ranching economics and wildlife habitat ..."

– Jim Crosswhite

Arizona rancher Jim Crosswhite uses government ideas and federal grants to bring back water quality and wildlife habitat

By Courtney White
for Headwaters News

It is not a coincidence that for 10 years Jim Crosswhite ran circles around the Himalaya Mountains – literally. To say he enjoys a challenge is like saying a fish enjoys water, or a cow enjoys grass.

And after successful careers on the Chicago Board of Trade, in international finance, and as a competitor and organizer of high-altitude endurance trials, it is little wonder that upon "retiring" to a mountain meadow near Springerville, Ariz., Jim would try to cut the Gordian knot of ranch economics in the American West.

He may have succeeded.

When Jim purchased the 300-acre EC Bar Ranch in 1996, he knew it was in trouble. Rabbitbrush and sumac infested the uplands; blue gramma, the predominate native grass, yielded only 300 pounds of production per acre; raw, exposed streambanks meant the riparian area was unhealthy; and the ranch's infrastructure was in disrepair.

Moreover, Jim soon learned that Nutrioso Creek is native habitat for a federally listed endangered fish species – the Lower Colorado River spinedace.

Things became even more challenging in 2000 when a report by the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality identified seven miles of Nutrioso Creek, including Jim's three-mile stretch, as exceeding Total Maximum Daily Load standards for clean water, including excessive levels



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.

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of water-borne sediment, or turbidity, which can impair habitat for fish and other species. Jim's ranch was high on the list for action.

In other words, there was no shortage of challenges confronting the EC Bar. "In fact," Crosswhite said, "without a change in ranch management to improve water quality and aquatic habitat, I ran the risk of losing my water and property rights."

Making It Work

This is where the story, however, takes an unusual turn. Rather than get mad, get even or give up, Jim decided to cooperate with the agencies.

"When the Game and Fish guy came to our valley," said Jim, "my 85-year old downstream neighbor pulled out his gun and ran him off. But after realizing the benefits of partnering with agencies to improve my property, I invited him to talk."

To his surprise, Jim liked what he heard. So, rather than struggle against the regulations, Jim took a long look at the list of recommendations in the endangered species recovery plan and the state department's report. Some were already being implemented, so he decided to give the rest of them a try.

"I didn't feel like I was giving in," said Jim. "They had good workable ideas. And they wanted to help. In fact, I haven't met a government employee that I couldn't work with."

Jim swung into action with the energy and determination of a long-distance runner. Here a summary of the Best Management Practices that Jim has implemented so far:

- **Pasture improvements:** Jim built elk-proof fence, riparian and buffer strip fencing to create 15 separate pastures for rotational grazing. He limits grazing in riparian and buffer pastures to the dormant season only, with careful monitoring.

Rabbitbrush has been controlled and eradicated by mowing, fire, and root plowing, followed by overseeding with native cool-season grasses. Erosion has been reduced, habitat improved and annual livestock forage production has increased from 300 lbs per acre in 1996 to 4,000 lbs per acre in riparian pastures and 2,000 lbs per acre in irrigated upland pastures.

- **Riparian restoration:** After hearing Bill Zeedyk speak at a Quivira Coalition meeting about the benefits of induced meandering and stream stabilization structures, Jim hired Bill to develop a riparian restoration plan.

More than 20 riffle weirs, 10 post vanes, and 80,000 willows have been used to address water-quality and habitat concerns. The objective is to slow water down so sediment will naturally filter out, protect streambanks from erosion, increase aquatic and wildlife habitat, and raise the water table.

- **Improved irrigation:** Jim installed off-channel water wells for daily waterings by livestock and wildlife. The wells are also used to supplement surface water used for irrigation. A 250,000 gallon water storage tank, 2,000 gpm diesel-powered water pump, 20,000 feet of above-ground pipe, and 100 "big gun" sprinklers have replaced an earth ditch system that wasted 100 million gallons of water annually due to seepage and evaporation.

About half the sprinklers are located along two miles of riparian corridor to help establish and maintain riparian vegetation as surface flows dry up during drought conditions.

Judging from the numerous tours, lectures and articles he has posted on his Web site (www.ecbarranch.com), Jim has enjoyed significant success

with his restoration work. In June 2002, he hosted Arizona Gov. Jane Hull and other dignitaries in a celebration of the 30th anniversary of the passage of the Clean Water Act. The Director of Arizona Department of Environmental Quality was quoted in a press release as saying the "EC Bar's achievements serve as an excellent example of the power of environmental stewardship on private land."

To Jim, however, the best indicator of his success didn't involve a press release. It happened in late 2003, when the department decided to relocate the "reference reach" for 27 miles of Nutrioso Creek from a site below Nelson Reservoir, to "Reach 3" on the EC Bar ranch. This is significant because in 1996, "Reach 3" was officially rated as "nonfunctional" by hydrologists.

"While I didn't say anything to them at the time, I consider this to be about the highest award I may ever receive for riparian restoration," Crosswhite said. "After traveling to more than 70 countries around the world for 30 years, walking down the creek on a summer's evening with my wife and old dog is as good as it gets."

Making It Pay

The other unusual element to the EC Bar story is how Jim paid for all this restoration work. He created a nonprofit corporation, which allowed him to apply for government grants and other types of support that are not available to "for profit" corporations or private individuals. To date, Jim has pulled in 20 grants worth about \$1.3 million, with a 90 percent grant-approval rate.

"My philosophy is a simple one," he said. "When a government agency produces a report that identifies a problem affecting my private property and recommends solutions, then I want to participate in any grant program they may offer, including matching with my own funds. This way, as a private landowner, I can learn about issues, cooperate with agencies, and help resolve water quality and habitat concerns, while improving ranching economics."

In addition to the ADEQ, Jim has received grant money from the EPA, the US Fish & Wildlife Service, and the US Department of Agriculture, among others.

"Grants are like a loan from the bank but without the repayment," he continued. For example, he says he gets paid \$60 every time he turns on one of his sprinklers. He also says he gets \$2 a willow from the government when he plants. Eventually, he intends to raise willows as a business. "The feds can't grow as many as I can," he said with a grin.

His cattle operation makes money, too. He buys low-weight stocker cattle in the fall, fattens them up during the winter on grass that he has spent all summer growing and then sells the animals between January and March after the animals have gained as much as 200 pounds of weight.

Additionally, Jim benefits from traditionally higher prices for cattle in the spring. Meanwhile, he doesn't have the hassle of breeding, calving, herding, hiring, maintenance or any of the other costs of a year-round cattle operation.

Whatever other answers eventually develop, Jim likes to emphasize one central point: Conservation increases profit.

"I've more than doubled the number of animal units per acre by improving water quality through best management practices," he said. "More importantly, all the water quality projects I've done have increased my property values, no question about it."

It's all about incentives, Jim believes.

"These days, society would rather pay me to grow grass, protect fish and raise willows than just cows," he said. "If that's the market, then I'll deliver."

God's Work

Jim would be the first to tell you, however, that it's not all about money. One glance at his information-packed Web site tells even the most casual visitor that Jim is eager to share his experience and knowledge with anyone who is willing to learn.

He's not protective of "trade secrets" – quite the opposite. Jim seems genuinely motivated to share his success with the world, down to the last willow and grade-stabilization structure.

Jim has other motivations as well. On Thanksgiving Day 2003, a vein in Jim's right leg clogged from his groin to his ankle. Clots slipped into his heart and lungs, causing a 10-hour event that had, Jim would learn later from his doctors, a statistically predictable outcome of less than 1 percent for recovery. At one point his kidneys failed and his heart stopped beating. His wife, who is a doctor herself, called his recovery "a miracle."

While Jim credits his high-altitude training for strengthening his cardiovascular system, he believes that God saved him in order to complete his ranch work.

"I may be the first person in history whose first reason for living was to complete water quality and habitat improvement projects," he said. "I believe restoring and protecting my riparian area is doing God's work. I believed this so strongly that I was willing to bet my life on it and apparently God also agrees."

Returning to his work with a redoubled sense of mission, Jim directed the planting of 45,000 willows on Forest Service land along Nutrioso Creek in February and March.

Apparently he's just warming up to his latest challenge.

A longer version of this profile will be published in the [Quivira Coalition's](#) newsletter

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