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A West that works

## Grass farmer



Sam Montoya runs 220 head of cattle on 93 acres at Sandia Pueblo, a stocking rate that surprised tribal elders.

New Mexico rancher Sam Montoya proves ranching becomes sustainable when the focus is on the grass, not on the cattle

By Courtney White for Headwaters News

In two little words lies a great deal of hope for the rural American West: grass farmer.

They are words Sam Montoya uses to describe himself and what he does with the 93 acres of irrigated ground he manages for the Pueblo of Sandia, located a short drive north of Albuquerque.

What he does is grow grass. Lots of it. He harvests it with cattle. Lots of them. He makes a good living at it too, without having to break a sweat.

"When I retired, I decided to go back into agriculture," Montoya says with a smile, "but I didn't want to work very hard."

He doesn't. Every day he walks from his house to the pasture, opens one of the gates in the electric fence that subdivides the land into 33 paddocks, watches as the cattle stride to fresh feed, closes the gate, and walks home. The entire process takes less than fifteen minutes.

By moving his cattle every day, Montoya avoids overgrazing the land.

"I'm trying to mimic what the bison did," he says. "They kept moving all the time."

Montoya gives each paddock approximately 30 days of rest, which has resulted in grass so healthy that Montoya has run as many as 220 head of cattle on his little "ranch." In some parts of the West that's the capacity of a much larger spread. Of course, the irrigation helps, but even well-watered ground can be damaged by grazing if the land isn't given sufficient rest.

In one sense Montoya is a conventional rancher: He has the cows, the grass and the attitude. He watches the cattle cycle, buying when prices are low, selling when prices rise. And he has all the usual worries that come with the business of raising animals in a "New West" of cell phones, mountain bikes and lattes.

But there is little that is conventional about Montoya's operation – and that's



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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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where hope enters the picture. In an age when ranching is struggling hard to avoid becoming an anachronism, ranchers like Sam Montoya are leading the way to an economically and ecologically sustainable future.

But don't call Montoya "radical." In fact, he thinks of his work as quite traditional.

"I grew up on a farm," Montoya says. "My dad farmed for 50 years on the reservation. It's in my blood."

After college and a stint in the business world, Montoya embarked on a 30-year career with the BIA. Upon retirement in 1996, he felt the memories of his childhood beckoning and decided to return to agriculture.

"It's a way of staying connected to the land," he says, "and maintaining tradition." But by using "radical" methods.

The irony isn't lost on Montoya. "What's unconventional today will be conventional tomorrow," he says matter-of-factly.

## Oasis

When I visited Montoya's place for the first time five years ago, I could tell even from the interstate that something strange and wonderful was going on. That's because I could see a bright green square of grass in the middle of a large dull-brown field.

In fact, wedged between fast-growing Rio Rancho (an Intel-dominated subdivision now the fourth-largest city in New Mexico), the restless interstate, and the smoggy horizon we call Albuquerque, Montoya's little operation stood out like a green oasis.

But it wasn't a mirage. Pulling up to the "ranch" I saw a herd of cattle munching contentedly on orchard grass, fescue, strawberry clover and other grass plants. Two thin strands of electric fencing kept them in place. The animals looked fat and happy. So did the land.

"This used to be a sod farm," Montoya told me, nodding at the ground. "They stripped off the soil and grass and sold it. When they ran out, they quit."

Montoya asked the tribe for permission to try something else.

"When I told the Council that I was going to put 200 head on 93 acres," said Montoya, smiling again, "they thought I was crazy."

Montoya borrowed \$250,000, cleared and laser-leveled the farm, dug ditches, planted grass, fenced the 33 paddocks, fixed the central watering tank, turned on the water and stood back. When the grass grew, he turned out the cows. It was a struggle at first, he said, as the ground healed from its sod-busting past and as the cattle adjusted to the new system, but before long it paid off, literally.

Within three years, Montoya repaid the entire loan from the profits of his "ranch."

Montoya's operation remains an oasis of profit to this day. The key is reduced costs. His cattle are entirely grass fed, which means he doesn't need to purchase expensive grain supplements.

He doesn't buy much fertilizer either – his cattle do that naturally for him (2003 was the first year Montoya didn't use ANY fertilizer). He doesn't use any machines, as well, which means he doesn't have any bills for diesel, repairs, or insurance.

"I don't want anything that rusts, rots or depreciates," says Montoya.

Another key was timing. Montoya purchased a herd of skinny cattle when prices were low, fattened them up on the lush grass, and then sold the whole lot when prices soared. That was in addition to the annual calf crop he produced. Today, he custom grazes cattle from other pueblos – for a fee.

Profits and labor aside, Montoya will tell you that his proudest achievement is the flocks of Canada geese that visit his little place every year.

"When I took over there wasn't any wildlife around," he says. "Now they're here all the time. The other day I saw a white-tailed deer here. It means I must be doing something right."

## Lessons

The real key to Montoya's success is that he considers his principal crop to be grass, not cattle. That's why he calls himself a "grass farmer" – everything he does is focused on enhancing and maintaining the natural processes, including water, mineral and energy cycles, that produce healthy grass.

This approach is a serious departure from the practice of many ranchers in the West who tend to focus on the cow – genetics, forage requirements, weaning weights, and so forth – more than what's happening on the ground.

Roger Bowe, an award-winning "grass farmer" from eastern New Mexico puts it this way: "When my neighbors come on the ranch they look at one of two things - the cattle, or the horizon for the weather. I can't get them to look at the ground between their feet."

This is important, according to Roger, because the "No. 1 enemy of ranchers" is not environmentalists, the meat-packing industry, government regulations or global trade. It's bare soil, the failure of a good grass crop.

"That's where trouble starts" he says.

It is also where opportunity begins, as Montoya and Roger's profits can attest.

In both cases, the source of their "radical" approaches were Kirk Gadzia, a range consultant, biologist Allan Savory, and the Stockman Grass Farmer, a national publication that touts the benefits of "management intensive grazing."

Its editor, Allan Nation, recently wrote "Increased profit does not come from buying more tractors, a bigger bull, or more feed and fertilizer. Increased profit comes primarily from your knowledge of how to mesh your ruminants with the natural environment. I call it building your farm or ranch from the grass up."

According to Mr. Nation, "management intensive grazing" can work almost anywhere. "In my travels all over North America," he writes, "I have yet to see a farm or ranch correctly structured from the grass up financially fail."

Indeed, many ranchers across the West, both large and small, have switched to a "management intensive" or "planned" grazing system, where the timing, intensity and frequency of cattle impacts on the land are carefully controlled, with positive economic and ecological return.

Not all of them think of themselves as "grass farmers" but all of them pay close attention to their grass and all the signs of ecological health that go with it.

This thinking parallels recent developments in the range science community, where new protocols to measure land health at the level of soil, grass, and water have been published. Additionally, new ecological thinking about ecological "thresholds" and "states-and-transitions" models have a great deal to say about the role land health plays in nearly every aspect of land use – whether for wildlife habitat, wilderness preservation, agricultural production, recreational activity or ecological restoration.

It's all coming back to grass.

## Future

Not one to idle in his retirement, even if he doesn't want to "work very hard," Sam Montoya continues to plow new ground, so to speak. He recently helped form a new nonprofit organization called the Southwest Grassfed Livestock Alliance (SWGLA), which is a group of producers, land managers, conservationists and researchers that promotes and markets grassfed livestock products.

Montoya's timing, again, is right on the mark. In addition to the Mad Cow scare last year, there are other reasons to eat grassfed food. According to author and researcher Jo Robinson, "When grazing animals are raised on their natural diet of grass instead of grain, their products are lower in "bad" fat and calories, but higher in potentially lifesaving 'good' fats.

"Grass farming is healthier for animals, for farm families, for consumers, and for the planet."

Montoya believes, as many do, that grassfed food has the potential to strengthen ranch economies, bring jobs to rural counties and become a healthy food

alternative for urban consumers.

"There are a lot of challenges, however," he says, "especially in a dry place like New Mexico."

There are other challenges as well. "There's too much idle land," he says, nodding his head at the field that surrounds his farm. "It could be producing more food."

He is also troubled by the unwillingness of some people to work hard on the land today, especially the younger generation. He is concerned that people will lose the bond with their heritage that comes with an intimate relationship with nature through work. To change this, Montoya has decided to speak up a little bit more, stir the waters, so to speak, and try to change minds.

In the meantime, Montoya has work to do. He is not entirely satisfied with his own progress so far. He has set new goals for himself, including reducing the amount of bare soil visible on his place; improving the non-irrigated portion of the operation (which is also included in the regular rotation of his cattle); exploring the possibility of niche-marketing his beef to health-food stores; and, believe it or not, expanding the size of the herd.

"This place hasn't reached its potential yet," he says with a smile.

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