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A West that works

Pioneer burns back time



Sid Goodloe makes a presentation at the Quivira Coalition August 2002 Workshop on Rangeland Health on his Carrizo Valley Ranch in New Mexico.

Photo by
Tamara Gadzia

A New Mexico rancher uses fire and rotational grazing to erase decades of abuse and to restore the native landscape on his land

By Courtney White
for Headwaters News

If land management is more art than science, as many, including many researchers, say it is, then Sid Goodloe will enter the history books as one of the West's great artists and his Carrizo Valley ranch would be considered a masterpiece.

This thought came to me a few years ago while standing a hill overlooking his property. Surveying the lush savanna expanses, broken only occasionally by narrow strips of dense woodland that rose to the west and segued into a park-like ponderosa pine forest, I suddenly realized that I was looking at a work of art, fifty years in the making. It had all the hallmarks of a great piece of sculpture: beauty, proportion, vitality, skill, design and effect.

That the chosen medium was land, not marble, made no difference – the result was the same: awe and inspiration.



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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Only don't call Sid Goodloe an artist. He's a rancher first and last, with work to do – as we did that day. In fact, my momentary reflection happened only because Goodloe had walked off, gas can in hand, to inspect a pile of juniper trees that had recently been cut and pushed into a heap.

"It's a good day to burn," he had announced at sunrise. And true to his word, a few minutes after leaving the truck the pile erupted into flames.

As I watched the fire grow, thinking about art again, Goodloe returned to the truck, limping slightly – at 70 his only concession to age being hearing aids and a bum knee. He had no reason to be impressed by the conflagration he had just created; he had lit similar fires a thousand times by now. He tossed the gas can into the back and climbed into the front seat without a backwards glance.

"Let's go," he said in his Texas drawl. And we went.

"I paid \$19 an acre for the land, and for a while I thought I had been taken."

**– Sid Goodloe,
New Mexico rancher**

As we bounced over the rutted road, I pondered my revelation. Like all great artists, Goodloe is visionary, intuitive, opinionated, driven, exacting, and boundlessly energetic. But he is also pragmatic, flexible, and results-oriented. He has to be, or he wouldn't be in ranching for very long.

Perhaps that's what makes him, and his work, so inspirational; in blending art with science, vision with profit, and opinion with outreach, Goodloe – by near universal acclaim – has become one of the preeminent land managers of his time. He is a modern-day pioneer, trailblazing with a gas can and matches instead of brushes and oils.

And in the Carrizo Valley ranch, he found the perfect canvas.

Worn Out Country

In the early 1950s, after an education at Texas A&M and a stint in the Army, Goodloe left his west Texas homeland to cowboy on what were then big ranches outside Roswell, New Mexico. As he worked he also searched for, in his words, "a worn-out piece of ground" (i.e., affordable) that would be amenable to multiple use, had potential for profit and was a good place to raise a family.

In 1956, Goodloe found what he was looking for in the mountains near Capitan, in south-central New Mexico. It was Billy The Kid and Smokey Bear country – two characters that would play prominent roles in his life before long.

What he found was 3,500 acres of dusty, scrubby land nestled up against a national forest, choked at its higher, western end with spindly trees, and split down the middle with a dry, rocky streambed.

Thinking that this was what New Mexico was "supposed to look like," Goodloe purchased the property and began trying to make a living on a landscape that clearly had been battered and bruised.

As he quickly learned, continuous year-round grazing since the pioneer days had stripped the land of health. Simultaneously, an official Forest Service policy of "all fires out by 10 a.m." had caused thick stands of trees

to invade formerly open spaces on the property. Carrizo Creek had dried up, wildlife was scarce, and the carrying capacity was 60 cows.

"I paid \$19 an acre for the land, and for a while I thought I had been taken," said Goodloe.

It was an "Old West" legacy typical of the entire region.

"I had no idea that the massive number of livestock that came west after the Civil War and the good intentions of Smokey Bear were the cause of denuded watersheds and water shortages," said Goodloe. "When I first came here I was impressed by the toughness and self-reliance of my neighbors and friends, but I didn't realize that those characteristics didn't extend to the land. A fragile ecosystem had succumbed to the lack of understanding that came with our pioneer stockmen. It wasn't their fault, they were acting on the best knowledge they had at the time, but it sure made a mess of the land."

Two clues turned Goodloe's thinking around. The first was the discovery in Carrizo Canyon of a prehistoric petroglyph of a fish on a rock, indicating that the creek once sustained aquatic life. The second occurred after Goodloe attempted, and failed, to locate the southwest corner marker of his property, which was buried in a dense thicket of young trees. In frustration, he dug up a survey report from the 1880s and was astonished to read that the surveyors couldn't find a tree to mark anywhere near the corner position.

"Obviously something had gone very wrong," recalled Goodloe. "So I began to count the rings on the pinon and ponderosa trees that grew on the ranch. Ninety percent of those plants had come up after the Civil War. It was then I began to visualize open woodland, savanna and grassland."

It was then that the ranch began to be the raw material for a masterwork.

"Why not try to return to those days of stirrup high grass and streams with beaver dams and cutthroat trout?" he wondered.

Work

The first step was getting the cattle thing right. When he purchased the property, Goodloe implemented a classic rest/rotation system that he learned in school, dividing the ranch into summer and winter pastures. Also in accordance with his training, the goal of his brush control program was strictly to increase more grass for his cattle.

But progress wasn't happening.

Conditions changed dramatically in the late 1960s when Goodloe switched to a short-duration grazing system that he picked up from wildlife biologist Allan Savory, whom he met while touring Rhodesia. In the process, Goodloe almost certainly became the first rancher in the United States to implement such a system. He also was one of the first people to write on the topic when the Journal of Range Management published his article "Short Duration Grazing in Rhodesia" in 1969.

What was different, though, wasn't just the technical practice of rotational grazing – the Carrizo Valley ranch has 12 paddocks on 3,500 acres, seven for summer use, three for winter and the other two for spring and fall. What was important was how Goodloe began to look at the land as a whole system, and not just in terms of what was good for his cattle.

"My goal is an integration of all components – economic, human, and environmental," Goodloe wrote recently in another paper, "into a

synergistic, comprehensive plan that allows management for long term sustainability rather than short-term production."

For example, Goodloe defers most of his riparian area from livestock grazing between May to November and only "flash grazes" it during the dormant season. The short-duration grazing plan also gave his cool season grasses a break, which had an economic benefit as well.

"Managing for cool-season plants has probably made me more money than any other practice," Goodloe said. "Spring forages are simply a lot more valuable than summer forages and has more to do with a good calf crop than almost anything else."

Next, Goodloe switched to a breed of cattle he calls Alpine Black – a cross between Angus and Swiss Brown – that suited the environment better. Once again, his goal was to make his operation fit the land, not vice versa.

But his masterwork really began to take shape when he tackled the difficult and tenacious problem of too many trees.

"Everyone told me I was crazy," he recalled. "They assumed that the invading trees and brush was just the land returning to its natural state."

At first, he used mechanical thinning and chemicals to control the overabundance of woody material on the property, but the key breakthrough came when he realized that he needed to get fire back on the land.

"I'm an environmentally sensitive rancher. It makes me money and I like it!"

– Sid Goodloe

"Tree ring studies in New Mexico show that most forests burned every 7 to 10 years," Goodloe said. "Whether it was Indians or lightning, the land was kept in an open savanna state. Fire is as important to the land as rain and sunlight. It is the natural predator of the forest. So when the government stopped letting the forests burn over the past 80 years, the trees came in and the whole system unraveled."

To achieve his vision for the land, Goodloe began an aggressive program of thinning and burning. To make the restoration work pay, he harvested some of the wood for sale as firewood, vigas and fence posts to the residents of nearby, and rapidly growing, Ruidoso.

Methodically, like any determined artist, Goodloe willed his vision into being.

Today, cool season grasses have returned, the brush invasion has been turned back, water runs year-round in the creek (or at least it did until the drought hit), carrying capacity increased by 30 percent, and wildlife is thriving evidenced by a pronghorn herd that greets visitors at the ranch's entrance.

"The reestablishment of a presettlement savanna and riparian protection, working in concert with short-duration grazing and an environmentally adaptable breed of cattle," Goodloe said, "has resulted in healthy, heavy calves, improved game population and a feeling of accomplishment that can only be described as euphoric."

Audience

Like any artist, Goodloe appreciates an audience. It is much less about pride, however, than it is about his desire to teach and foster change. And have fun too. "Sharing knowledge and experience is not only a duty, but a gratifying experience," he said.

In 1998, I had my first exposure to Goodloe's teaching skills when I helped organized an "outdoor classroom" on his ranch. After introductions, he marched us onto adjacent Forest Service land where he dug a trench in the bare ground between two large junipers, exposing thousands of minute roots. He told us how trees consume nutrients and moisture and shade the ground. Grass can't compete, so there's only bare soil and erosion now. Rain carries off topsoil, ripping gullies, he taught.

For many of us, we would never look at the ground the same way again.

One audience that proved initially to be a reluctant learner was the U.S. Forest Service, which owns the land that surrounds his ranch on three sides and controls the upper watershed. Goodloe understood that restoring his land to health was only half of the whole job – as a raging, lightning-sparked fire on forest land above his ranch in the mid-1990s proved.

Goodloe goaded the Forest Service into action primarily by educating the public with countless tours, workshops, and public speaking engagements. This effort bore fruit in 1989 when the agency began the Carrizo Project, a 55,000-acre thinning and prescribed fire demonstration project that drew praise from many observers.

Other efforts bore more fruit. In the 1980s he helped co-found the New Mexico Riparian Council, a collaborative conservation organization focused on educating landowners and others about the importance of healthy riparian areas.

In the late 1990s, Sid began to ponder yet another challenge: inheritance. "When I began to investigate ways to pass my ranch on to my children, I decided that a conservation easement was the best way to avoid the unfair estate tax and provide them a place to raise their children or grandchildren in a rural environment," he said.

To accomplish this vision, Goodloe approached the New Mexico Cattlegrowers' Association about setting up a statewide, rancher-run land trust, as had been done in Colorado and California. His overture was rejected.

Undaunted as usual, Goodloe responded by starting a land trust of his own, called the Southern Rockies Agricultural Land Trust (SRALT). Today, SRALT holds more than 10,000 acres of easement-protected property in New Mexico.

To observers, and admirers (at least this one), the lesson gleaned from Sid Goodloe's diverse accomplishments is this: Don't underestimate the power and value of a vision.

"It is my hope that future residents will provide their children the incentive to develop a work ethic, western values, and innovative techniques – characteristics that are more readily acquired on a ranch than in town," he said, with characteristic frankness.

Goodloe has demonstrated innovative and sustainable methods of land stewardship, contributed significantly to public education about sustainable use of natural resources, promoted and implemented the collaborative process in resolving land stewardship conflicts, and has demonstrated proactive leadership in promoting and achieving land and community health.

And like all great artists, he led the way.

"My ranch was the first holistic management venture in the country," he said. "It took a lot of years and I made many mistakes. Now I have figured it out and I try to share that. I'm an environmentally sensitive rancher. It makes me money and I like it!"

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